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— N. inter. '1

THE LAST INSPECTION

by the same author

RAIDERS' DAWN

HA! HA! AMONG THE TRUMPETS

THE LAST INSPECTION

BY

ALUN LEWIS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

EIGHTEEN of the twenty-three stories in this collection are concerned with the Army in England during the two years' attente since the disaster of June 1940. They are, if you like, studies of a 'hang-over' Death in battle, death on a large scale, and all the attendant finalities and terrors—these are outside. They are the bread and water of our comrades overseas; we have the cakes and ale. The only deaths in these stories are from air raids and accidents, the main motif is the rootless life of soldiers having no enemy, and always, somehow, under a shadow.

Written out of immediate experience, typed up on leave, impelled by a perpetual sense of urgency, they are rather personal observations than detached composition, and, *faute de mieux* I leave them to say what should be said—that in England it was thus and thus, in a time that—God be thanked—is past.

I wish to thank the Editors of *Horizon*, *Penguin New Writing*, *Life and Letters To-day*, *English Story*, *The New Statesman*, *The Manchester Guardian* and the *Welsh Review* for permission to include stories which first appeared in their journals.

The Author also offers his thanks to the Editor and Publishers of "*English Story*" for permission to include "*They Came*" and "*Interruption*."

ALUN LEWIS,
Home Forces
June 1942.

CONTENTS

	page
Author's Note	5

PART ONE

1	The Last Inspection	9
2	Flick	15
3	Private Jones	21
4	Almost a Gentleman	45
5	Farewell Binge	51
6	It's a Long Way to Go	59
	(i) Change for Dinner	59
	(ii) The Last Day	63
	(iii) The Moon	68
7	Lance-Jack	75

PART TWO

8	The Wanderers	87
9	Picnic	107
10	The Lapse	113
11	Interruption	117
12	The Housekeeper	121

PART THREE

13	Acting Captain	139
14	The Children	179
15	Ballerina	189
16	Cold Spell	193
17	Dusty Hermitage	207
18	The Prisoners	215
19	They Came	227

THE LAST INSPECTION

EVERYTHING was OK in the loco sheds. A couple of sappers were running the shed doors up, the grey rainy half-light swirled into the dusk of the sheds, lapping against the glittering green engines and the braziers of burning coal where the fitters were working on a broken down shunter, everything was OK. Old Baden-Powell, an LNER 1910 box engine detailed for the day's special job, hissed and screamed fierce clouds of steam while the driver and fireman just touched her up with big swabs of cotton waste and a fitter with a flare lamp squeezed a last drop of oil into her nipples.

December 31st, 1940, and the Brigadier teady to start his last tour of inspection before retiring with the old year. He had retired once before, but when war began he came forward in the same spirit of service as the rest of us to help the nation in her war effort. He was very fat indeed, with a red apoplectic face, and he walked slowly just to be on the safe side. He was going to see everything today, for himself. It's only natural when you're retiring, you want to see for yourself whether any work has been done during your tenure of office, how things have been getting along, sort of thing, because when you're at the helm you haven't any time to go dashing into the stokehold to supervise the trimmers, have you? You even have to rely on the word of your mate that the anchor has actually been raised.

The sergeants in the sheds were arguing about beagles. One

said beagles only hunted hares Another said that was wrong because there was a pack of beagles at Woolwich Arsenal and they didn't hunt hares because there weren't any hares left in London. Another one said beagles didn't hunt hares anyway; down his way they used "lurchers" for hares, mostly on a Thursday. There were a lot of sergeants in the shed Nobody knew whar half of them were doing

Fred Tube was driving old B P He was driver on the London to Brighton line in civvy street, cool as a cucumber at seventy an hour

Morgan Evans was firing her He had a boil on his neck and he was browned off He chucked his cotton waste away and sat on a packing case and yawned

"Have a fag, Mogg?" Freddy said, finishing wiping the oil off the scrubbed footplate

"No thanks," Mogg said, yawning again "I've chucked smoking Somebody's got to lead a clean life, even if the mis-sus won't"

"It's cold these mornings," said Fred "I'm wearing my long pants"

"Too thick for me," Mogg said "I've sent mine to my old man He's warm, even if the old lady isn't"

"What are they? Pensioneers?"

Mogg nodded

The R S M came out of the loco office, resplendent in Sam Browne and brown shoes, looking most important

"Get her out of the sheds, Tube," he said "Come on, Evans. What are you lounging about for? None of your Bolshie ways here. Get cracking Waken your ideas up And remember, both of you, don't jar her when you brake Brake her gradually. There's a dining car on her to-day If you tip any of the dishes

you'll be on a charge for careless driving. And I'll see to it you get no mercy. Get cracking."

"Yes, miss," Mogg muttered, swinging himself onto the foot-plate.

They pulled out of the sheds, picked up the two posh carriages that had been waiting for fifteen years in the carriage sheds for this supreme occasion, the diner and the saloon, comfortable as upstairs in the pictures, smelling of carbolic and Jeyes and the summerings of lunch, and rolled along to the regulating station to pick up the party

They were all waiting, the colonels and captains turned out like new pins by their batmen, the women in sables and astrakhan with little veils on their hats and silk stockings showing right up to their knees. And in the middle of them a mountain of flesh and khaki in a brass hat with a lovely red band round it, the Brigadier. Beside him his daughter, a blonde whom the boys called Unity, and beside her, at a decent interval, her fiancée, a dark thick moustache and a cap pulled down over his nose. He was only a second lieutenant and he wouldn't have been allowed to come if he hadn't got engaged to Miss Unity, so he got engaged. He was due for a couple more pips now, no doubt. Leave it to Unity, as the boys said; it was a kind of slogan in the camp—when the latrines wanted cleaning and that.

And off they all went.

There were a lot of things to inspect. The camp area was several miles square and the military line wound about like an undecided snake from barracks to barracks, from construction yards to stores depots, from ordnance dump to M.T. park. And at every station a guard of honour stood on the cinders that made the platform and slapped their rifles when the sergeant

yelled Pree-zent—AMMS and the whole party piled out and the Brigadier saluted and inspected the guards' buttons and the whole party piled back again and Freddy Tube said "Up, Nelly," and off they went

During the last twenty years they had been trying to make the two ends of the railway meet by constructing a loop at each end which was to meet in the middle at a point among the gorse and scrub which was marked X on the big chart in the Brigadier's office. But one thing and another had prevented the completion of the task during peace time. There was no real urgency in peace time. Now things were different. National emergency, supreme effort. When the Brigadier came out of retirement to answer the call he said "The line *must* be completed. Immediately." It would show he realised the gravity of the situation. But the line hadn't been completed although he had spent many week-ends in London—before the Blitz—in trying to get the War Office to allocate him sufficient construction stores. Meantime the work gangs went out to the job every day and did what they could. In winter it was rough on them because they couldn't keep warm without working, but in summer it was O.K. Anyway the Brigadier was looking forward to seeing how much they had done. It was *his* line, his monument.

But first lunch

Freddy drew her into the siding and he and Mogg sat on a lump of coal each and ate the huge bully beef sandwich they'd drawn from the cookhouse before coming to work.

The diner was next to the engine. Mogg went for a stroll along the line to hear what they were eating.

Lunch was scheduled to take an hour and a quarter. Then the party was to transfer to a little open internal-combustion car which would run them along the new loop line as far as it went.

But it was cold and morbid out, and—damn it all—it began to drizzle a bit; the windows of the diner were wet with drizzle outside and with condensing heat inside, and lunch took longer than they expected. You can't knock such good red wine and old scotch back in a hurry, it's a crime, and when a fellow is retiring like that, well, it's a shame to gabble the speeches off and hurry off and get wet and catch a cold as like as not. So they cancelled the inspection of the new line With regret

Mogg and Freddy were sorry, too, for one of their mates was waiting on the party and he'd promised to save them a bottle of scotch and some fowl which they'd be able to eat when the party was off down the line And the sergeant in charge of the work gangs was sorry, too, for he'd gone to the trouble of indenting for 80 pairs of gum boots for the men and getting the men to wear them for the day And now he'd have all the trouble of collecting them at evening and returning them to Brigade Stores without the compensating pleasure of the Brigadier remarking on how well equipped the men were

But there you are An order is an order

Mogg enjoyed listening under the windows in a hungry sort of way There were four speeches, three by colonels about the Brigadier and one by the Brigadier about the three colonels And then there were four toasts The Brigadier The Ladies The Army And of course The King

Then the Brigadier said he had one last toast to propose.

Silence in the diner

"To Victory!" he said

"To Victory!" they all replied.

Mogg strolled back to the footplate where Freddy was dozing by the fire "The war's nearly over, Fred," said Mogg, grinning sulkily "We've dug for Victory and saved for Victory. And

now they're drinking for it."

"D'you think there'll be any left for us?" Fred said

Then a waiter came along with two glasses of whiskey on a tray marked Players Please

"From the old man," he said

"Hacha!" said Fred, grabbing a glass "Come on, Mogg, this'll warm you up"

Mogg took his glass

"To the old man," said Freddy

"To his successor," said Mogg "Let's hope he knows there's a war on"

"Now then, none of that Bolshie talk," said Freddy, savouring the drink on his tongue. "You don't know no more about it than the old man So drink his whiskey in a Christian spirit"

"Who said its his wiskey?" said Mogg, sticking to his guns

Then the R S M came along and told them to get cracking

And did old Baden-Powell make a dash for home?

He was in the sheds, cooling down, before you could look round

"*And* I didn't jar the brakes, neither," said Freddy, the master craftsman, patting the antedeluvian tank

"There's a telegram in the office for you, Fred," somebody said.

"O Christ," said Fred, turning grey at the thought of his wife and kids in Shoreditch "Oh Christ Oh Christ"

Mogg took his arm, gently

FLICK

WHEN he joined our battalion in January '41 I was a soft-foot subaltern fresh from OCTU with no experience of actual fighting. He came to my platoon I remember looking at his dirty paybook, then at his strong travel-tired face and square body loaded with equipment. F. L. C. Wilson was his name. "Lot of initials, Wilson," I said, rather fatuously "Call me Flick, sir," he said, a little grin in his close-set blue eyes. An unusual way for a private to address an officer; but it was so naturel I scarcely noticed it was strictly—shall I say?—improper. I glanced through his paybook. Payment in French and Belgian francs from March to June 1940, then no entry until January 1941. Odd, I thought

"Why this gap in your pay?" I asked.

"The paymaster'd done a bunk, sir," he said. I liked the little grin he had in his eyes. "I stayed in Belgium till I got brownd off. Then I did a bit of hitch-hiking through France and Spain. Home again, now"

"Christ!" I said, looking at him with awed respect "Do you smoke?"

He didn't tell me much then, he was tired and had to draw some blankets from the stores and get a snack in the Naffy before it closed. But I got most of the story out of him bit by bit during the next week. He didn't want to talk about it, he waited to see what I was like first. He could be a mule, I discovered.

He'd been in three prison camps In occupied France he'd killed two sentries with a knife in getting away In Marseilles he'd drained 100 Czech lorries of petrol, filled the tanks of a pleasure launch anchored off the island where he was jailed, and with two others sailed three days for Gib before being picked up by a French destroyer and yanked back to solitary confinement and trial for theft A brave French barrister defended him, arguing successfully that the Czechs were British allies and that theft was therefore inadmissible He got away again and made for the Spanish frontier Two Scotties went with him, both died of exposure in the Pyrenees (He lived for three weeks on a bottle of whiskey and wild plants and snow) It took him from October to December to reach Madrid The Embassy smuggled him home

He'd discovered several petrol and munition dumps during his wanderings and had blown them up The War Office checked up on this at an interview they gave him. A general thanked him and recommended him for seven days leave and a commission He didn't get the seven days because the battalion was expecting embarkation, he refused the commission, so he was, as he said, just about where he'd started I asked him why he wouldn't take a commission He shrugged his shoulders

"It isn't what I'm looking for," he said, his eyes I noticed could become very reflective, despite their laugh

I got to see his way of looking at things after a time It was so simple that it baffled me for a month or two In such men you look for cross motives His impulse was basically direct He didn't want rank, swagger cane and Sam Browne didn't concern him. Similarly, before the war, he didn't want to be top of the form in school, or a know-all in College His old man wasted a lot of money on him by the time he reached Greats at

Oxford. Then he gave it up and went into business through his father's connections and insistence. He didn't want that, either, but he wanted to be independent of his father, who was fed up with him, so he got his elbows shiny and mooched along on the theory of diminishing returns. What you might call a failure; or the aimless youth which is the raw material of Fascism, etc. etc. Only you see he had a constant underlying seriousness, a touchstone of good sense; also a purpose in living though its unfulfilment meant perpetual restlessness. You wouldn't ask a man what he wanted to become, you only ask children that, and you feel an old fool even with children. I never asked Flick what he had in his mind, I knew he was serious, though.

Anyway he didn't want a commission. He was nearer what he wanted in the ranks, kipping down in dirty blankets, eating off boards, drinking in any old boozey, knocking off for a smoke during a day's digging or wiring, yarning quietly with the colliers and labourers who were his mates. He wasn't the submissive type and I knew a lot of things riled him. The way the RSM, immaculate and peremptory and arid, snarled at the men when he was inspecting them on guard mounting; or the retarded coarse little CSM. keeping them on parade for twenty minutes after a route march out of sheer bloody-mindedness, or the O.C.'s fussy and not over-competent interference in their daily ritual of weapon training and gas training à la pamphlet—all this angered him. Only he didn't see that he'd be any less involved as an officer. What he wanted to do was to get out of it. He wasn't a peace-time soldier, he said, and as soon as it became clear that the Battalion was not going overseas he put in for a transfer to Commando. The O.C. was relieved, I believe; he didn't understand a man of Wilson's

experience and 'social qualifications' (*quelle phrase!*) refusing even so much advancement as a stripe, he felt uneasy with him—the little grin in the blue eyes—and strongly recommended his application

I managed to sneak a fair bit of time in Flick's company. It was taboo in the battalion for an officer and private to consort; so we got out of the place as much as possible, or he came round to my bunk in the nights and we argued about life and friends and motives till the small hours. I grew to think that my chief was duty to waken his imagination, he'd become very like a Hemingway man, taking what came, selecting his friends by trial, valuing nothing higher than independence, mistrusting all ideologies. I argued Socialism at him, got him to read again—it didn't matter what, his taste was the better for its neglect—and we had a good time together. We talked more and drank less during the three months he was with us. And his spirits became more spontaneous, more responsive. He was worth a lot on route marches or the dull hours of the big invasion exercises. He'd get a rabbit or a pheasant for supper; he'd find and chat with the wise and eccentric old people of farms and pubs, he carried the anti-tank rifle on his strong shoulders when the march got over-long for the rest—he called it his next-of-kin, and he never let the hypnosis of footslogging and subservience subdue him. When he left us at the end of May every man-jack in the platoon, from me to 28 Smith who carried the mortar and always had a moan, regretted his going. We all had a drink with him the night before, even the teetees, and afterwards I strolled under the pines with him till God knows when in the dusky glow of the moon. It was as if he had something he wanted to tell me, I guessed, later I found I was right, but he didn't manage to break the long silences.

with it. Going to turn in at last he said, "Well, good-night, chum. I think this war is worth winning after all. Thanks for straightening it out for me. I didn't understand there was so much in the balance." And off he strolled without a handshake.

He wrote one or two letters during the summer, but not much. He liked the Commando better than the battalion, less blarney and bluster about it, more chance of action, otherwise not much difference, they didn't seem to bother about the war, he said, and wished I was near enough to argue about Lenin and Lilburne and Milton and Franklin D. I wrote back and said I didn't know why I wasn't.

Well, in the autumn I got a third letter from him. One about as long as the other two—that is, short enough to quote in full. I'll copy it out when I've finished this last thing that happened.

News doesn't travel fast in the Army, your pals may be killed or sent overseas, dropped in France or thrown into Madagascar before you find out by chance when you're on leave, or meet someone in a pub. So it wasn't till January, just a year from the time I met him first, that I heard what had been Flick's particular luck. He was in the Commando which raided Vaagso, and he was one of the unlucky ones. Actually it was an HE bomb from our own planes that got him, perhaps he was at fault, perhaps the pilot misjudged it a bit. Not that it matters, the thing is, Flick is dead. I was told that in a pub I did a sloppy thing in a way, ordered a pint and left it on the counter for him.

This is his letter. „Dear Nicky,—I'm told there's something big in the air, and for once I've got a hunch I'd better tidy my affairs up—not that it's possible to tidy them much. Look, will you do me a very great honour? If I don't come back, keep in touch with Mrs. . . of . . . (an address). She's the

mother of a girl I was engaged to before I went to France. When I was missing after Dunkirk, Mary (my fiancée) had a baby boy. She was a nurse and she went back to nursing. She was killed in November, when I was in the Pyrenees Her hospital had a bomb, dead-plumb Her mother is a brick and is looking after the child I haven't seen him. Couldn't, somehow. Please help them when you can, Nick. Sorry to bother you. Cheers Flick."

PRIVATE JONES

DAFIS the post came down the lane to Siencyn's cottage earlier to-day than usual. He walked his bicycle through the stony muddy ruts, ringing his bell to call them out. Siencyn was still in bed, but Marged, his wife, had been up a couple of hours, feeding the wild chickens that nested in the apple trees and gorse bushes and mixing some swill for Granny the sow.

"It's come, Marged fach, it's come," Dafis shouted, his excitement at a gleeful pitch. "Siencyn's notice is come."

He brandished a small brown envelope.

Marged straightened her heavy body, wiped her wet hands in her sack apron, showed nothing.

"Diw mawr," she said to herself, thinking that something important was happening inside her.

"Siencyn!" Dafis called, leaning his bicycle with its tied-on parcels against the crumbled wall of the cottage. "Your calling-up notice I got for you. Look alive, boy."

Siencyn poked his long head out of the tiny bedroom window, his hair the colour of swedes. He was in his flannel night-shirt.

"Coming now, Dafis," he said cheerily and withdrew. He pulled his trousers and clogs on, and came downstairs buckling his leather belt across a handful of trousers, very excited.

Dafis opened the letter, Marged looking over his shoulder. She was twice his size.

"Printed matter," Dafis said "There for you Instructions, look Railway travel voucher Free trip, see?"

"In the train?" Siencyn asked.

"Third class," Dafis said. "From Cardigan station, Great Western Railway, to Talcen station, ditto East Wales Fusiliers it is for you, Siencyn bach, poor dab Plenty of V.C.'s they got already Watch out, you."

"East Wales Fusiliers, is it?" Siencyn repeated "Well, well Third class?"

"When is it?" Marged asked.

"Friday next, 21st inst.," Dafis said "Take your identity card, Siencyn bach, don't forget that, now. Or it's C.B. you'll be right from the word go"

"Jawch," said Siencyn, "there's a lot to remember, Dafis Where's my identity card, Marged? In the poe in the spare room, is it?"

"And your birth certificate is there," she said, knowing where to put her hands on things "You'll have to find somewhere else to keep your things from now on, Siencyn bach"

"Aye, that's true," he said, rubbing his tangled hair "Well, I better go round and tell everybody"

"Don't trouble," Dafis said "I'll tell them on my round Stay you, my boy I'll come down to-night and give you a bit of wisdom, see? Four years of it in the last war I had, and no more for me thank you" He looked at his right hand, from which three fingers were missing "German sniper did that," he said proudly, and then screwed up his red bunioned face into a wink "Held it up above the parapet, see, Siencyn, and got a nice little blighty But there, you don't know what a parapet is yet, I don't doubt"

"I'll learn," Siencyn said, with all the good will in the world

"You will," Dafis said, speaking with the sardonic finality of experience "Solong both."

"Solong Dafis, thank you," Siencyn said

Dafis pushed his bicycle off, the cycle clips pulling his small trousers up nearly to his knees. He wore a straw boater all the year round, Dafis did

The third winter of the war was just relaxing its grip on this closed corner of Cardiganshire; six weeks of frost had held up the winter ploughing and the spring sowing, and Siencyn had been having a soft time of it, lying in bed in the mornings, chopping a bit of firewood, mending a few broken scythes and shafts, patching up the cowsheds of his employer, cutting enough hay for the drayhorses, and a pint or two some nights. He had been medically examined and registered a whole year back, but his call-up was deferred for the summer harvest and the autumn trapping,—Siencyn was the official trapper of the parish and sent four hundred and thirty-seven rabbits to Cardigan station, Great Western, in five weeks,—and then the winter ploughing. He had got tired of waiting, restless and unable to merge himself in his work and the weather and the requirements of the horses and of Marged. He was a good-natured man, but out of patience with things. He had quarrelled with Marged a lot this winter, beating her once, leaping out of bed on a Sunday morning when the cracked church bell was tolling, and beating her for calling him an idle heathen. And she used her tongue on him for that. Said that people were saying things about them. What things? She shrugged her shoulders. Once he'd cleared out of the way, they were saying, perhaps they'd discover before a year was out whose fault it was there were no babies coming in their house. Well, that wasn't a nice thing to say, and it says a lot for Siencyn's good nature that he only

shrugged his shoulders and said pity they hadn't got more important things to think about than that. She didn't use the rough edge of her tongue on him again, but she was very secretive and moody all the winter. He didn't worry about her; he'd go and she'd stay behind; she was his wife, there you are; nobody is indispensable; she wouldn't want to leave the place she'd been born in, whether he went or not. It was different with him. He wanted to see the world. Lots of the boys from round about went into the merchant navy; either the sea or the land it was with all the boys. And he held it a grudge that his widowed mother had kept him home to work at odd jobs instead of letting him go to sea. His father must have been an old soft, too, he wasn't wounded and he wasn't ill in the last war. He just died. Ran home three times from the army, and then died in detention barracks. Heart-broken, his mother said. Well, what a complaint for a man!

Nobody had a bad word for Siencyn, except that he was idle and fond of his drink and irregular as a christian and not reliable for doing a job or fetching you something from market or being prompt at the chapel concert rehearsals. So, when he went round to say solong, everybody was sorry to see him go and genuinely hoped the army woul make a man of him before it got him killed. Old Mari Siop, who had a soft spot for anybody in trousers, said she thought strong men like him ought to stay at home in case the Irish attacked us. And he had a real good walk-round, ending up at the Ship hotel, saying good-bye and drinking basin after basin of tea in the cottages and then a pint all round on the house. This was on his last night, and you wouldn't believe the offers he had to knit comforts for him, and old drovers and flannel vests fetched out of the cupboards where they had lain since their wearers had

died. He took them all, and all that he didn't drop on the way down from the pub he carried into the kitchen where Marged was sitting doing nothing by the wood fire. She was cross with him for taking them, they'd be saying now she couldn't look after her husband's pants even. She was always seeing the worst side of everything these days. She was almost fit to cry with desperation over a little thing like that.

So they had a bit of bread and milk for supper, not saying anything at all. Then he fetched the money from under the bed upstairs and counted it out, five pounds thirteen and four, and divided it into two piles three pounds thirteen for her and two pounds for himself. And then he got up and very clumsily and hesitantly smoothed her hair back. She was vexed, and said what a mess she was, all untidy and fat-getting, and she bent her head forward as if she was feeling bad; and she was all white and her eyes were yellow and suffused with watery blood. He was shifting from one foot to the other, uneasy about what to do, and she wouldn't say a thing one way or the other. Dumb she was.

And he was thinking how happy everything and everybody had been when he went round the farms this afternoon, and now Marged spoiling it all. But when she looked up at him, raised her head to him slowly as if there was a millstone round her neck, and then stood up with her arms raised a little, and said that Welsh word to him that she hadn't said since they were courting, then he knew it was a million times better to feel black and torn in pieces like this than to be laughing and drinking tea and saying the Germans wouldn't last long now he was in it too. He picked her up, and she wasn't heavy any more, and carried her up the creaking stairs as if she was a young virgin. Only she was better than a virgin, her fine big

body which his big shivering hands slowly divested of the red jersey and thick skirt and woollen stocking and flannel vests that she wore on it winter and summer. The moon was out and the river ringing on the stones and the old jollyboy owls crying goodywhoo in the wood, and he knew he'd been waiting for this for a whole year, to say good-bye to Marged like this. And she lay warm and silken and trembling under his huge hands and she heard neither the river nor the owls but only him grunting and breathing in her mouth and in her ears and something gentle at last opening inside her, like a baby begging her to receive it in.

Onions she boiled for his breakfast the next morning, and two hard-boiled eggs and a whole small loaf uncut for his pocket, and off he set, six miles to walk to Cardigan station. Dafis the postman had forgotten to bring him some stamped addressed envelopes, but he had found a letter in the grandfather clock with their address on it. He didn't know how to write the address himself, but somebody would copy it off this old letter for him when he got there, no doubt. So everything was alright. Plenty of wood left for the fire and Marged walking to the crossroads with him, and the weather crisp and young, the cockerels crowing all the way in to Cardigan station, and Dai Pencwm passing him on the road giving him the benediction of the big pew. His heart was like a feather, walking like this through his own countryside, seeing the sea through gates in the sandy hedges, and singing Dr Parry's *Jerusalem* to himself which was this year's test piece at the Fisteddfod, and feeling a free man, as if he owned the place and no need to pick up a shovel nor a scythe nor the handles of the plough.

There were other men like him on the train the last part of the journey, from Swansea. But they were different to him,

smoking cigarettes and wearing posh navy suits and pointy shoes, with white silk scarves and grease on their hair. He sat a long way from them and he felt hot and uneasy. But when they got there it was all in together and fags out and form up in threes with a soldier showing you how with a silver-knobbed cane, and march through the street into the barracks. Then he lost direction and control, there were so many things and people. He knew how to sign his name, S Jones, where they told him, but they wouldn't give him enough time to do it in, and he had to keep on signing in every room they went into, whereas he had never signed his name more than twice a week before, on the dole that was. But he was doing pretty well out of it, same as last night everybody was giving him things—mug, knife, fork, spoon, blankets, bag for straw, khaki suit, leggings, boots, cap, and lots of straps that he didn't know what for. And then a rifle and a bayonet. You didn't take long to become a soldier, for a fact. Then they had a good meal in the cook-house, with girls in khaki doing for them, and then the most of them went out for a booze, and cursing everything they were when there were no corporals about. But Siencyn didn't open his mouth, and he was frightened a bit because he'd lost count of what was happening, and he wanted to lie down and sleep, being suddenly very weak and shaky and yawning all the time. As for Marged and all them at home, they didn't exist any more. It was all up with them, there was no doubt.

"You're looking buggered, Jack," a dark man said, sitting on the floor cleaning his rifle in the empty barrack room.

Siencyn, like a frightened animal, watched him suspiciously.

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

"It isn't worth worrying about this lot here," the man said. "They don't count in this war. They're all peace-time soldiers."

They don't know what the war's about, they only want to stay here and shout on the square and take the tarts out. You keep your head up Don't pay any attention to them."

"Yes," said Siencyn not understanding much except that the man was friendly, "that is so for a fact."

The man began cleaning his buttons with a button stick and silvo. "I'll learn you how to do things," he said. "They don't mean anything, all the things they do here, but you might as well do them properly, just to show them there's nothing in it, and then get on out somewhere where there *is* a war"

"You been a soldier before, is it?" Siencyn asked, friendly with him now, like a dog that barks first, then growls, then wags its tail and sidles up

"Not in this army, mate. I fought two years in Spain, though. Seen a bit of it then, like"

"For a living, is it?" Siencyn asked, shifting up, willing to listen.

"No, not for a living," the man laughed „A collier I am for a living, when the pits are open Collier, stay-in striker, party member, anything's better than keeping a greyhound, chum"

"Spanish they speak in Spain?" Siencyn asked

"No, not much now. German and Italian they speak there now But it doesn't matter much there now"

"*This* war will do for me alright," Siencyn said "Farm labourer I am, see, and trapper"

"That's right You keep to the plough, mate It's only a knife in your back or a few years in jail or no work and no friends you'll get if you start doing what you believe in I've never had time to marry a wife, and yet I've never done nothing I can show"

"I'm married," Siencyn said. "It isn't very much of a thing,

only down our way you got to get married if you want any peace, see." The man smiled, and Siencyn smiled back, and then sat thinking of the thing he'd just said

"No girl in the valleys would take me on," the man said. "They want a steady man, see I'm an anarchist. I won't go and live in two rooms and feed my kids on bread and dripping and make them sell the *Football Echo* and read the race results in the paper and shout hooray in the park on Labour Day."

Well, well, thought Siencyn, this is a different life to mine, and what it all is I don't know. But I wouldn't like to be on the wrong side of this man, because he is like the prophet Ezekiel, and he can kill people by seizing their wickedness in his hands and squeezing it till they choke.

And Siencyn became devoted to this man, and he wasn't afraid of all the things that happened to him in the next few weeks

Well, Siencyn became 283749551 Private Jons, S., before you could look round, and the nickname he went by was Timoshenko, which was something like Shenkin, his own name. And the first morning he wore his battledress he had to take it all off and lift his shirt and cough and bare his arm and have a needle in it, all in a whirl, walking round the room with all the others because there was no time to sit down and no furniture, not like waiting for the doctor at home. And then they all walked past a man in a white apron standing on a stool and they had to open their mouths for him and when he looked in Siencyn's mouth, he said "Christ! Take the lot out. Top and bottom plate for this man Ever used a toothbrush?" Siencyn said yes, because he'd used one in the infants' school, but he wasn't a kid any more so of course he hadn't used one since. He was a married man now Jawch!

He was very bad after that, with a big swelling under his arm, and he crawled into his bunk like a sick animal and lay there till he was better, which was a day later. And then he had all his top teeth out, and his new boots were hurting something wicked, and he didn't have a handkerchief to wipe his bleeding mouth which was dripping into the tin of potatoes he was scraping, and the sergeant called him a dirty something and the next morning he was marched into a room and the officer looked fierce at him and said "283749551 Jones, S Is that your name?" And he was told by the officer to get a shake on and wake his ideas up and not to come back to him again or look out And Siencyn said he didn't want to come back again, not likely, and then he saluted the way he'd seen them do it, and he'd have smiled just to show there was no ill feeling, only his mouth was full of blood And when he got back to his bunk and they asked him how he got on, he grinned—because he'd spat the blood out on the way back—and said "The bastard!" And that made everyone laugh and slap his back and say he was a bloody good soldier already, calling the OC a bastard like that And he always called everybody a bastard after that if they said anything rough to him, which was nearly always, and he felt better straight away then

After he'd been there a fortnight and getting on famous with the boys and not too bad with the sergeants, and knowing how to slope and present, and halt and start up again, and fix bayonets and standing load, and unload, and two weeks wages, ten shillings a time, a telegram came for him, and that made him hot and excited and the centre of every eye, as you might say But it was only Marged wanting to know if he was alright, because on account of forgetting to bring Dafis's stamped addressed envelopes he hadn't written home, not liking to ask

any of the boys to copy the old address out for him, and no news is good news, isn't? But the OC sent for him again and asked him if he had quarrelled with his wife or what, and told him it was bad for civilian morale not to write regularly and tell them you was getting on fine. So he confided to Daniel Evans from Spain and Dan wrote a letter for him in two shakes and addressed it and they posted it together on the way to the Naffy, and Dan said why hadn't he asked him before, it was nothing to him and he'd write Siencyn's letters regular for him. If he wasn't such a good man and a good scholar and knew everything about fighting and mining and unemployed and capitalists, Siencyn would have grabbed him by the waist and wrestled with him same as they used to do in the country when they was boys in school and big friends.

And at the end of three weeks the whole issue of them was sent off by train to the east coast of England to finish their training in a battalion that was short of men and wanted them handy in case of invasion. And in this new place it was the same as before only worse if anything. They had a new sergeant-major who shouted like a bull and you could smell his breath when he shouted. He came up close and shouted in your face, so you could only *think* he was a bastard, he was too near for you to mutter it. But their sergeant didn't like the sergeant-major and told the boys that he was separated from his wife for stripping her and thinking out dirty things to do to her, and he was only shouting like that because he wanted to keep in with the colonel. So Siencyn didn't bother about the sergeant-major shouting, now he knew there was no religion in him. But some of the boys that you'd have thought wouldn't care a bit—boys always boasting about what they'd done, big breaks in billiards, supper in married women's houses and that

—they became like shivering wet rats after a bit and the sergeant-major used to pick on them all the time and shout at them till they shivered all over, only with Siencyn and Spain he never bothered at all. And as for the sergeant, well, he couldn't keep a straight face on parade with Siencyn. And when Siencyn caught a rabbit one day out on an exercise by putting his hand in a hole where he knew a rabbit was, and gave it to the sergeant to give to the grass widow he was always telling them about, the sergeant was always kind to him after that. Siencyn couldn't remember all the names on the Bren gun and the mortar and the 36-grenade and the anti-tank rifle and was gases and all that. So the sergeant never asked him the names when they were being tested.

The only fly in the ointment was the officer in charge of them. Not the young one, he was alright, nobody bothered about him, but the one with three pips that walked around all day looking at everybody, and when he stopped in front of you on parade he grunted and muttered to himself and then told you what a bloody army you were to be sure. Siencyn didn't like the smell of him, and he didn't feel strong in front of him the same as with the other sergeants and officers.

Everybody was frightened of him, yet they all said he didn't know his job and ought to be sacked. And there were lots of stories about what he did in the nights with his spare time, but still Siencyn couldn't stand up to him. Not even when he found out that the colonel could make the captain shiver like a rat the way the captain did to those under him. And one day, when their training was over and they were taking part in brigade schemes and defending aerodromes and building dannert fences and laughing at the Home Guard like hardened regulars, the captain sent for Siencyn and said "I hear you're a country

bumpkin, Jones." And Siencyn said "I live in Penyrheol, Cards, sir." And the Captain said, "I hear you were a poacher, Jones?" And Siencyn said "Trapper, sir." And the Captain said, "I'm putting you to work in the Officers' Mess, to catch rabbits and partridges for dinner, and you will be my batman; and if there's any silvo on my uniform or you get caught with a dead partridge trespassing, I'll break your bloody spine, do you understand?" And Siencyn wasn't brave enough to say no, so he said "Yes, sir."

So he became a batman for a change, and it was as bad as he feared, because when he woke the captain in the mornings it was like shaking a nest of adders, he always had a liver and and a white tongue and never pleased with anything. But sometimes Siencyn got away on his own, three times a week, after rabbits and pheasants, and then he was as happy as could be. When the captain was shouting for him to clean his Sam Browne or fetch some hot water because the hot water had gone luke warm on account of him not getting up when he was called, Siencyn felt as bitter and cynical as Dan Evans Spain, who was always sneering at the talk in the papers about fighting for freedom and decency and our children's futures. But when he was lying in the ferns watching the way the pheasants went for grubs, or setting a snare in a rabbit's run, then Siencyn really felt as if he were fighting for freedom and the right of a man to live his own life. Anyway, it was no good looking at things the way Dan Evans did. No doubt it was true all he said about the coal owners taking all the profits and the children without a decent pair of boots or a warm coat, and about the men in London exploiting the natives in Africa and India, and about the *Daily Worker* being banned like in a Nazi country; and when he put it to you you did find it

queer to wonder why the poor women and babies suffered themselves to be bombed in the slums in Swansea and London when they wasn't getting anything out of it that you could see. Siencyn didn't have anything against the Russians, but all the same he didn't think it much sense wishing you could be one, and it was easy to see that nothing was the way it ought to be these days if you went by what it says in the Bible. But Dan was only making it hard for himself, refusing a stripe and barely civil to the captain and the sergeant-major and both of them with their knives in him, and it was a pity he was always getting daunted by what he read in the papers, or by what he said about the army being unprepared and untrained and unarmed to fight a war with tanks and divebombers like they'll have to. But all the same, if it came to fight, Siencyn wouldn't think twice whose side he was on. Dan's side he was on. Dan Spain was a man and he'd like anyone to deny it.

Every now and again he got a letter from Penyrheol, written in Dafis the postman's copperplate hand, with bits dictated by Marged in it and grandiloquent flourishes of Dafis's invention embossed on it, giving him the news as it left them at present and hoping he was in the pink. The first two or three letters had nothing abnormal, except that the sow had been up to the boar and was expecting, and the latch had fallen off the back door and she had tied it with string till he came home, and her marriage book had come and she had to walk to the post office every week to draw her twenty-eight shillings, and she was putting some of it by to buy blackout curtains so she could have a light in the house after dark for a change. Then came a different letter, very brief, and not written in Dafis's hand at all, but in pencil by Marged, and it said "Sienscyn bach, wen coming back are you i am being sick in the mornings

and the doctor jest been an sed i am in for a baby hopping you are not angry yewer loving Marged."

Siencyn sat with this for a long time, and then he began laughing to himself, and got up feeling like the lord of creation, and went to look for Dan Spain to tell him and see what he said. And he didn't want to tell anybody except Dan, although he was just bursting with the news. So he went out of the guard room where he was on guard and across the farmyard and through the sheds looking for Dan. But Dan was out on the cliffs the other side of the wood laying some mines, so Siencyn went after him, forgetting he was supposed to be on guard. And just as he came out of the woods and could see the grey North Sea and the black stubby shapes of a convoy jinking southwards in the middle seas, zoom-woof-scream, down came a big two-engined Dornier 215 for you, straight for the soldiers working in the minefield, straight out of the clouds over the sea. Somebody shouted and a couple made a run for it, and a few more fell on their faces, but most of them just looked up at it. And Siencyn looked at it with great interest, not having seen a Swastika before, and then it opened fire and swept past him only just above his head. One of the boys who was running staggered and clutched his guts and went sprawling, and Siencyn said "Diw Mawr, too bad," and ran out of the woods to pick him up. The plane had zoomed up over the trees behind him and was climbing in a great ellipse, going seawards, but Siencyn was only concerned to fetch the boy who was hurted, because he was one of the rest of them, and he was hurted. It was Nick Powell Tonypandy as it happened, and he was a mate of Siencyn's, they'd been on a charge together for putting Naffy buns in their respirators and he was going to get married to a butcher's daughter next leave, so his prospects were too good

to waste by a bit of bad luck. And Siencyn picked him up and carried him fireman's lift, like in P.T., to the shelter of the woods. Nick was groaning and cursing healthy enough, so Siencyn told him to be quiet, it wasn't a thing to blaspheme about. And he put Nick against a tree and Nick said "He's coming again," only he didn't say it as polite as that. And Siencyn saw the Jerry diving in from the sea again like second house at the pictures and he saw the Bren gun the working party had brought out with them ready loaded by a gorse bush just in front of him in the open, so he said "Look out, boys bach," and made a dash for the Bren gun and grabbed hold of it, kneeling, with the butt against his hip. And the Jerry was coming straight for him with spurts of flame coming from the wings and bullets like a little shower of hail sweeping towards Siencyn. And a silvery bomb fell out of the plane as it came to the bottom of its gradual dive and was showing its nose to the climb, just at the sea edge of the minefield. And Siencyn said "Now!" and pressed the trigger as cool as you like. And nothing happened. Oh Jawch, there's a pity for you, Siencyn thought, what is the matter with the old thing? And the explosion of the bomb knocked him over before he could see whether the safety catch was on Automatic or Safe. And when they brought him round with plenty of cold water and his arm in a sling, Spain was kneeling by him and the captain fidgeting and muttering same as usual, and he remembered he had something to tell Spain about, but for the life of him he couldn't think what it was. And Spain said "Well done, Siencyn boy. You're a chip off the old block, you are." And Siencyn said "Is Nick Powell alright?" And Spain said "Aye, it was only a flesh wound; he's O.K. for the butchery business, don't worry." And Siencyn said, "The gun wouldn't go." And the

captain said "No wonder, you bloody fool. It was on Safe. What the hell's the good of wasting khaki and food and training on a cretin like you?" And Siencyn, although he was on his back with his arm in a sling, suddenly felt immensely stronger than the captain for the first time in his life, and he looked at him and grinned and said "You bastard!"

Well, the captain's face was a sight to behold. He pulled at his sagging cheek and opened his mouth and stood on his toes and didn't say a word. Then he said to Spain, "You're a witness, Evans." And Spain said "I didn't hear a thing, sir." And he looked at the captain with a funny look in his eyes; he'd killed a tidy few men in Spain, Dan Evans had, and Siencyn got the wind up and he said, "Don't do it, Dan bach. Leave him be now. We're all in the war together so make friends, the two of you." And the captain said "Consider yourselves under arrest, both of you." And off he went to fetch the sergeant-major. So Dan sat on his heels like the colliers do in the back lanes and waited for somebody to come back, and kept on spitting and spitting and saying he'd give him what for if he dared to court martial them. He knew very well the Colonel would dismiss the case if he heard what the captain had said to Siencyn when he was knocked half daft by the bomb, and Dan said he'd get it brought up in Parliament if they did anything to them; and Siencyn lay against a tree as idle and as happy as ever he'd been in his life, because he'd called the captain a bastard and Dan had said "Well done."

Siencyn didn't take long to mend, his collar bone wasn't broken, only bruised, and the colonel praised him in the court of enquiry that sat on Nick Powell's wound; and nothing was heard of the little difference they'd had with the captain, and everybody was buying him drinks in the Naffy for what he'd

said So he had a very placid fortnight on light duties because of his arm. And then, at the end of a fortnight, two things happened that demanded a good bit of thinking out

First there came a letter for him, and it was a very short one, and it wasn't from Marged and it wasn't signed Dan read it and said it was an anonymous letter. And it said that Marged was having a baby in case he was interested, and who was responsible, this person would like to know? Funny there'd been no baby in four years when he was living with her, and now as soon as he'd gone to serve his country she goes and gets in the family way. And then several names of likely men from the neighbouring farms and a hint that Marged had been seen coming out of the wood by Twm Gors's cottage late one night And this person anonymous said it was a shameful sin if nobody could respect a soldier serving his country in her hour of need, and was pleased to sign at the bottom, Sincere Patriot.

Well, whether to ask for compassionate leave or not was the question, but Siencyn wouldn't go and tell the captain all these terrible stories about Marged fooling him, so Dan said why didn't he do a break and hitch-hike home And he thought yes, he'd do that, but he had no idea at all where Penyrheol was from where they were then, and he'd never find it in a month of Sundays So he made up a story with Dan that his mother was dead—which was true enough—and Dan wrote it out for him in case the captain asked to see the letter, which he would. And Siencyn was just off to see the sergeant-major to ask for an interview, when the runner came down and said they were both wanted in the company office So up they went and the sergeant-major had a cunning look in his eyes as if he had them on toast at last, and he showed them into the office,

quick march, right wheel, halt, left turn, salute, "Privates 32 Evans and 51 Jones, Sir" And the captain looked up after a minute as if he was busy, and said, "You two are on draft for overseas service. Hand in your AB 64 to the CQMS (Siencyn never knew what all the initials meant, but Dan would tell him afterwards), and take your blankets to the stores Seven days' leave Any questions?" "No sir" "March them out, sergeant-major" About turn, quick march, halt, dismiss

"That's what comes of calling him a bastard, Siencyn," Dan said, philosophically tracing the effect to its cause. "You'll be able to see your missus, anyway, chum"

They had their pay and ration cards and passes and off to the station, six miles of it, full kit, enjoying evry inch of it. Dan said anonymous letters wasn't worth noticing, he'd had plenty in his time, and the best thing to do was to find the sod who wrote it, and not say a word to Marged Siencyn said he wouldn't put it above Twm Gors, but he would put it above Marged, who was a good wife if trying at times And so they parted at Paddington the best of friends, with Dan seeing Siencyn was on the right train and telling him to mind he came back and didn't shrik it, because Dan didn't want to go abroad by himself So Siencyn told him not to worry, solong

And nothing more to do except stand all the way to Cardiff, and then a seat the rest of the journey, change at Carmarthen and Pencader like Dan told him, and then safe and sound in Cardigan, having had sandwiches from an old lady before they got to Cardiff and cake and biscuits from another younger lady between Swansea and Carmarthen. He wasn't going to spend his pay himself And he didn't tell anybody he was going overseas because it was information likely to aid the enemy, so he pretended he was nobody special And so he

started walking home along the old roads he knew inside out, singing *Jerusalem* and wondering if the chapel would be holding its Eisteddfod this week, and if so he'd sing *Jerusalem* in his battledress and walk away with the first prize over them in civvies.

And soon enough he was turning down the lane to the sea by the black wood and heard his employer's horses shuffling in the stalls; he stopped to listen to the good sound, and then went into the stable to take their heads in his arm and put his palm against their hot wet nostrils. It was fine, that was, pushing old Deri aside to say good night and welcome-home to Nansi, and their hooves clashing on the cobbles. It was only round the corner then to his own cottage and he felt as if he'd never been away.

There was a blackout up in the back kitchen now, very posh, and when he opened the door slowly Marged was sitting on a sack of meal by the stick fire on the flagstone in the corner. But never such a face did she have before he went away. No red in her cheeks at all, but like a funeral in her black shawl and drooping shoulders. And she looked at him like he was a ghost, never a word, but frightened of him, and then again as if she was finished with him for good. It gave him a bit of a turn, and before he could say "Well, nghariad, it's Siencyn turned up again," she began to whimper to herself. Siencyn knew there was a scene going to be, so he took his kit off and knelt down by her with a sack under his knees not to spoil the trousers he'd creased under his bed every night, and then he asked her what was up with her. How they straightened it all out isn't anybody's business except their own. Marged wasn't willing to believe he'd forgotten about her letter owing to being knocked daft by a German plane, but in the end believe

it she did, and slowly she began to think differently about him and not with despair and hatred the way she had been since he hadn't replied. And then there was all the old gossip, and a letter in the local paper about it too by somebody signed Sincere Patriot; and she knew who it was, it was a certain black-marketing grocer keeping a shop on the top road. And Siencyn said thank God it was a man, anyway, thinking what a pity if it had been a woman he couldn't give a good lamping to. And, to cut a long story short, Marged said she wanted it to be a boy and Siencyn to be his name, and Siencyn showed her his new false teeth and she wouldn't believe he took them out at night, so he said "Wait and see." And she rubbed her cheek on his battledress and looked at the shine on his boots and wouldn't believe they were his working boots. And if everything wasn't as smooth as their words made it sound, the rest was only a question of time, for a woman will mend herself with time if so be the man means what he says when he speaks kind to her. So she patched up alright with a bit of praise from Siencyn which was as rare as Cadbury's chocolate to her and every bit as sweet. And Siencyn felt worried and exhausted with pulling her round to his way of seeing it all, and it was worse than driving the old sow up the lane or helping to shoe a young colt, but Jawch, it made all the difference. And next day he went without any malice to the certain grocer's just mentioned and after he'd pasted him good and proper he bore no ill feeling at all. And when they asked him how's the army he said it was alright and nothing to worry about, although his mate Dan Evans said it wasn't much of a concern.

And then, the night before he went back, the chapel held its annual Eisteddfod, which was right in Siencyn's line having a rich tenor a bit loud for volume but very good for one.

And he went in his battledress as clean and straight as a new pin with vaseline on his hair the colour of swedes, and they all cheered when he came up to sing his version of *Jerusalem*. And he never let on to a soul that he was down as a C of E. in the Army through no fault of his own, having told the clerk when asked his religion "Christian, sir" No that there was any need to say sir to a clerk, but he was new to the game then. And it was fine to be standing there in the whitewashed old chapel with Marged sitting in the pew where he'd carved his initials fifteen years ago, and everybody quiet as the grave except old Twm Morris Cobbler at the harmonium, saying "One Two Three Four—*Now*." And off he went with old Twm creaking along just level with him and the faces of the congregation uplifted and swaying slowly as if there was a little breeze going across the pews And he'd sung it so often in the back of a lorry on exercises in the Army, and in the latrines, and peeling potatoes on jankers, that it came now with all the intimacy and rejoicing of all that had happened to him and not harmed or beaten him And when he'd finished there was a great silence on them all, and then the men wiped the sweat from under their celluloid collars, and the women sniffed at their hankies and wouldn't look up And Siencyn walked down and sat by Marged And then they began to clap, and Siencyn didn't think they were ever going to stop And although the adjudicator was a conshe in the last war he didn't have any option about giving Siencyn the prize. No money in it, of course, not with singing sacred music, it was a different matter from money

And Siencyn walked home with Marged arm in arm, and he said Dan Spain would write to her regular, but he didn't have the heart to tell her where he was going to, meaning abroad, not yet, because he could only just imagine himself

going abroad, and as for coming back again, he couldn't see that at all. But there was nothing to be done about it, only go to bed early and poke his head out of the window to listen to the river and tell the cockerel mind to crow at five thirty to catch the train. And that made Marged laugh for the first time, and Siencyn thought well, it's not so bad so far and no blame attached to me. And Marged promised she'd call the baby Dan as well as Siencyn. And they slept so sound that Jawch if he didn't miss the train. But never mind about that now.

ALMOST A GENTLEMAN

THE last evening of our O.C.T.U. course we decided to go to the music hall for first house and then have a farewell round of beers at the end of the night. A modest leavetaking; we were good friends, we didn't need to get drunk in order to enjoy each other's company, and we were pretty washed-out with the last fortnight's series of route marches and exercises both by day and by night. We saw a lot of acrobats and crooners and patter merchants; and Billy Bennett, whom the programme described as 'Almost a Gentleman.'

"Reminds you of poor old Burton," David whispered to me. And I laughed.

I can't tell you why I laughed, I felt ashamed of myself for laughing, but I can tell you about Burton, the little that I know.

He was a beefy six-footer with black curly hair, huge arms and feet, hooked nose, twinkly sharp eyes and a skin that was blue with shaving in the morning and stubbly by night. He'd come to the O.C.T.U. from an infantry division and he looked a good soldier. The first few casual chats I had with him sufficed to show that he had an active critical faculty and a roving surface intelligence. He resented the inaugural homilies we received about developing the officer mentality, and, sitting next to me in the lecture hut, made facetious remarks *sotto voce* on the theme of democracy and the forward march of the peoples. He evidently knew his Churchill. He had an oblique

way of making his cracks, an ambiguous irony, as though he were always covering himself against a possible accusation of being Red. For instance, we were talking in the canteen one evening about imperialism. I was suggesting that a century ago Britain was bored with her colonies and only the Non-conformists and Evangelicals at the Colonial Office felt any interest in the Empire, and they only because they wanted to spread the Christian gospel to the natives.

"And we're still utterly disinterested," Burton said. "I think we're wonderfully lucky to be born under the Union Jack. I think the British are awfully decent. Still, don't let's talk about it. It's unEnglish to talk about things like that."

Only the sly grin on his red little mouth showed his real meaning. Somebody took him seriously and felt unusual pride, "We've been jolly good to the Jews, too," this chap said.

I felt something grow hot and awkward in our little coffee group then, and for the first time it dawned on me, in that momentary silence, that Burton was a Jew. Of course, the hooked nose, and perhaps the voice, too. He had a weak voice for a big chap; insinuating and a bit plaintive, with a double entendre instead of emphasis. His word of command in front of a squad was boring and devoid of personality. Two other obvious qualities in his character were laziness, or rather unpunctuality, and greed, or perhaps a huge appetite. He was invariably last on parade, and also last to enter the mess. People said he was late at meals because the last table usually had only a few stragglers to eat the twelve men's rations placed on each table. And one or two of the more arrogant Britisher type taunted and insulted him about it. They would put a plate of scrag-ends and cheese-rind salvaged from their own table in front of him as they passed out after the meal, and—here

is a third characteristic—he endured their insults with as patient a shrug as Shylock on the Rialto. This submissiveness riled me, I asked him why he didn't use his fist—he was big enough

"It's no use making things unpleasant," he said. "It doesn't do your career any good."

He was deliberately prepared to swallow insults in the belief that his career would prosper thereby I saw that his idea of careerism was affability all round. He selected the cadets who were important in any way—Grenadier Guardsman, Military Medallists, M A's—and cultivated conversation with them. He analysed the instructors and officers to the same end, deciding which were straight, which were snobs, which were bluffers or bookworms, and he knew what each one wanted to see. He altered his mode for each instructor. At the same time he always talked democracy. He had a pile of dog-eared Left booklets in his kitbag. He pasted little Help Russia handbills in the latrines, and he never ceased jibing at the pukka cadets—not that there were many of them—with public school ways and B.B.C. accents, private cars, money, women, and levity.

He hitched himself onto our crowd after a month, evidently considering us worth supporting, and we liked him quite a lot. He was very racy, and really not at all vicious. He had a handsome young wife and a two-year-old daughter, of whom he talked a lot. He saw them every week-end he was free and he was very happy talking about them. "I travelled 200 miles by road this week-end just to spend one night with my wife," he told me one Monday. "I don't suppose you chaps would think it worth while. I suppose you think me silly. But we think it's worth it. She and I."

"Alright," I said. "Don't boast about it."

He flushed, thinking he'd made some breach of etiquette.

"Beg your pardon," he said silkily. "It's that ass Burton, doesn't know what's correct."

And he switched the talk over to his favourite theme, the pamphlet mentality of the Army. "What we want is to get blitz-conscious. We're not panzer-minded enough. Still resting on our Waterloo laurels and studying Wellington's letters" And similar catch-phrases.

And then he got scared. It was within a month of the end of the course, we had begun negotiations with the tailors who flocked round the gates, we could see the end of our incubation period in what some of us called the O.C.T.U, others the O.G.P.U. Burton was asked to present himself at the Company Commander's Office one morning. When we saw him at the mid-morning break his rather flabby face had an ashy de-bauched look.

"I've been warned," he said, dramatically.

We were taken aback.

"If I don't improve in my leadership during the next month I won't be commissioned," he said "D'you know what he told me? He said I lacked decision" He paused, looking at us beseechingly. "I ask you. Have any of you ever seen me lack decision?"

David, my mate, who is impulsive and frank to an unusual degree, blurted out—"Decision? I've never seen you show any."

"Aw, Christ." Burton complained. "I've never made a mistake in the field since I joined up. What d'you mean?"

"Well, you asked me, and that's what I think," David said.

"What about a cigarette?" I said.

The last month of the course played the devil with Burton. Failure ravaged his mind, his voice become sly and apprehen-

sive, he developed a persecution mania, avoided the officers and instructors, and used every break in manoeuvres and lectures, every evening in the reading room or the canteen or the local to gain the sympathy and approval of his fellow cadets. He talked incessantly, moving restlessly from one group or table to another, talking politics, tactics, strategy, religion, uniforms, films, and most of all the shortcomings of cadets who had not been warned to improve. It was pathetic, the way he tried to woo public opinion; and of course it gained him nothing.

We had two written tests during the month and he swotted like hell for them, then got into a panic, and finally cribbed his answers from me. The tests weren't marked, so nobody was any the worse. But it showed me how terrified his mind was, like a rabbit's in front of the weasel.

And on the last Saturday of the course the weasel got him. He was told to take the white band off his cap, hand in his equipment and get out. I saw him before he went. He was surprisingly calm and dignified.

"I knew they were determined to get me," he said. "I didn't say anything. It wasn't any use. They've got the power. What can I do? Nothing at all."

"Never mind," I said, feeling rotten about it all. "You can do as much for the world in black boots as in brown, Burton. Don't let it get you down."

"Thanks a lot," he said, his eyes moist. "It's nothing unusual for me. Well. It's been nice to see the inside of an officer factory. They can't take my memories away, can they?"

His little blue eyes were already roving vaguely round, as though exploring his new environment and considering the likely direction of hostility and of advancement.

"I think it's rotten luck," I said, acutely embarrassed. "Solong, and keep your heart whole."

"Solong," he said, giving me the clenched fist "Salud. Or is it Heil?"

And he went off to catch his train.

What perplexes me is how they found him out. He was so plausible in public, and he looked a useful bloke to have in a scrap. The officers couldn't know that he cringed under an insult or ate more than his share or was scared to death by the fear of disfavour. They didn't see him as often or as intimately as I did. On an outward showing he was much more intelligent than lots of the men who got their commissions without mischance. But whatever the reason, they got him alright. I felt that they'd made a good soldier into a bad one in five minutes; still, that was their pigeon.

The thing that touched me most deeply, and which made me regret laughing at David's remark about Billy Bennett's "Almost a Gentleman" turn, is that he assumed the mantle of persecution with such a quiet fatalism, as if it were his customary wear. He deserved it in a way. But how did they know that he had the soul of an underdog? this mute inglorious Dreyfus?

THE FAREWELL BINGE

THE soldiers had been drinking pints for an hour when the three A.T.S girls came into the bar. There was a blue fog, and a noise Everybody was talking and smoking The yellowing piano was doing its best, considering its age, the row of pint glasses that weighed it down, and the maudlin, heavyhanded crooner who was thumping it

'If I should fall in lerve agen,
I'd fall in lerve with you agen,
The same old moon aberve . . '

"I'm sweating," said Dick, undoing the neck fastener of his khaki tunic "Hurry up, Tony. Empty that pint Four pints, missus, and one Worthington"

"Here's to those who are going East," said Tony, waving his glass over his head "Good lads all as I well do know And to hell with the Wops! Cheers!"

He smacked his empty glass on the counter, startling a young officer who was leaning over the counter talking to the fat little platinum barmaid.

"How about those A.T.S dames?" said Mack in a stage whisper.

"Forget them," said Dick, long and serious, and stooping slightly "Why waste time?"

Tony remembered a wet morning, months back in June, when he and Dick were sitting together in a tin lean-to peeling

potatoes. They were somehow very browned-off, and for ages didn't want to speak, but were content to peel potatoes, simply. Their hands got cramped and wrinkled. They didn't know each other much. Then they got talking. Dick told about his girl. Tony listened. Dick spoke so quietly.

She'd jilted him, he saw her one night in a pub in Brum, with a snake. He began to get queer. Everybody seemed to be laughing at him. When he entered the office they changed the conversation. When he left it they began talking and laughing about him again. He broke with his pals. One day he hit the chief clerk in the office. Then he lost the guts to go out of his digs at all. He hadn't touched a girl since.

I'll never smile again
Until I smile at you;
I'll never lerve agen ...'

Mack and Ted asked the A.T.S. girls what they were drinking. Rouge and lipstick looked silly in khaki.

"Get us two gins and lime and a gin and orange, Tony," Mack called out. He had taken a chair by the fire with the girls.

"Get them yourself," said Tony.

There was too much row in the bar for him to be heard.

"All right" said Dick, shouldering the young officer to one side. "I'll get them."

"Fool," said Tony, shrugging his shoulders.

Dick took the shorts over.

"This is Dick," said Mack, beaming all over his English face, his blue eyes, big lips and receding chin lapping them all in joviality. "Dick's my pal. He stops the floor from rolling when we come in on Saturdays, don't you, Dick?"

Dick grinned sourly. The A.T.S. tried to look full of "it."

It was a special night for Mack. His first binge, in fact. Natur-

ally moderate and innocent, his suburban upbringing and his long years as insurance clerk, together with his fiancée and his truss had combined to lead him decorously through life. He was very good-natured and had been in the same Company as Ted and Tony and Dick since they joined up. Route marches, squad drill, fatigues, church parades, manoeuvres, dances, innumerable cups of tea in the Naffy, countless gossipings on the worn grass outside the tent—all this they had shared. But not much more. Anyway, he and Dick and Ted were going East to-morrow. Houris, dates, topees, deserts and Wops running away. And a vague feeling of great danger that he wouldn't summon into the light and analyse, instead he let it brood in him, and darken the brilliant colours of his idea of the East—a sunburnt land on a classroom wall-map—and give a certain solemnity to this their farewell binge.

"Two double whiskies," said Dick, leaning over the bar.

"Take it easy, Richie," said Tony "You know I'll be sick if we mix them. And I'm on demolition work to-morrow."

"Who cares about to-morrow?" said Dick gloomily. "You'll probably blow yourself to pieces and get discharged for inefficiency. Why worry?"

He was tighter than he'd thought. Thoughts were whirling through his mind, he looked at the fat, indulgent barmaid, puffy and powdered a dead white, the amorous lieutenant, the shelves arrayed with gay bottles, the mirrors all over the show, the walls plastered with autographed photos of music-hall starlets, the A.T.S. girls laughing and smoking Turks, Ted and Mack on top of their form, a sergeant talking to a nice-looking girl in the corner, out of the way (she wouldn't look anywhere; their knees were touching); conventions whirled past his mind's eye like telegraph poles outside an express carriage window,

all slants and angles, falling, falling.

"Here's a fine show," Tony was saying, looking at a big photograph in a cheap frame. "Smithfield cattle mart."

Dick stretched his long neck to look. It was a flashlight photograph of the annual dinner of the Licensed Victuallers' Association. Rows of boiled shirts and boiled faces and bottles and women.

"Now then, no politics allowed," Dick said "Have another?"

"I often wonder what the vintner buys, one-half so precious as the wares he sells," Tony replied. "Like that, Dick?"

"Sure," said Dick "Poetry, isn't it? Say some more".

He certainly was drunk. The words Tony was saying filled his mind with colours and sounds, expansions and contractions and undulations of loveliness. He certainly was drunk.

'Here in this battered caravanserai

Whose doorways are alternate night and day

"Have another, Dick?"

Tony had stopped

"OK," Dick replied. "I'm going outside first, though."

It was freezing outside. The stars were like hard incandescent jewels, poetic, tugging him as if he were a wave, a foaming up-rearing white wave. The dark was like velvet, ice-cold. Overhead a Jerry plane, turning round to make a down-wind attack on Southampton. Ack-ack in the distance, underlining the horizon with thunder. He turned back into the pub, feeling suddenly very sober and shabby. A bit sick, too.

'His whisky was waiting for him. He knocked it back.

"What's the matter, Tony?" he asked—Tony looking so serious for once, Tony who was always ready for a laugh, no matter how wretched they might be—and they'd had a pretty lousy time, off and on, what with dirty blankets and leaking

rents, invasion scares, night guard, spit and polish and fatigues, heath fires, orders, orders, orders. And the home town being bombed every other night

"I don't know," said Tony. "I feel as if I'm sitting up on my slab. I don't know."

As if he'd paid the proper price for jollity and the goods weren't being delivered. Was it the beer? Or mixing it? Or the cheap commercial bric-a-brac of the saloon? The sham?

"I've just bought another three gin-and-limes," he said.

"Mack didn't pay you for them?"

"No "

"What a pall!" Dick said. "Sponging on his mates, eh?"

Dick joined the scrummage round the bar

"Excuse me, gentlemen and other-ranks," he said. "Two double scotches, please, missus"

The young officer flushed Dick felt sorry at once No politics allowed, he'd told Tony Damm himself'

"Let's sit down, Tony," he said, returning with the drinks

They sat at the next table to Ted and Mack and the A.T.S. dames It was hot and noisy, a filthy heat.

They sat quietly, sipping their whiskies

"Remember getting inoculated the first day?" Tony said suddenly "It made me home-sick as hell "

Dick looked into his glass as into a crystal

"Remember that wet morning peeling potatoes, Tony?" he asked quietly

Tony's face lit up.

"You remember that, too?" he said

"Of course," Dick replied

They were silent again

"I'll be glad when the war ends," Dick said "Not that Civvy

Street's all that good But the Army's no place. You're only a number here, you've got no pals in the Army; a pal is someone you go with wherever you are, someone you can *be* with."

"I wish I was going with you," Tony said thoughtfully. "I'd give my life to have a real man's chance out there."

He picked up the empty glasses.

"Wait a minute," Dick said.

Tony watched him as he leaned forward, sour-faced, and touched Mack on the shoulder. He was in the middle of telling the A.T.S. a risky joke. He shook Dick's hand off. After they'd had their laugh Dick tapped him again.

"Hallo, Dick. Still here?" said Mack, looking goofy with the light in his protruding eyes.

"Buy us two double whiskies, Mack," Dick said.

Mack laughed.

"I'm not that drunk," he jeered.

"I said two double whiskies," Dick repeated, like a gunman.

Tony felt something tense up in him. He could see now. In the middle of all this fug and booze Dick was doing something genuine, something vital to himself. He was testing the quality of a friend. He could see now just exactly what Dick wanted, what he sought, what he valued most, the thing by which he lived. It was his touchstone, his guide through the maze and the chance.

"Don't interrupt. I'm entertaining," Mack said, shaking free and beginning another joke. The lip-stick was running a bit. It was hot over the fire. The girls must be rolling tight.

"Sod him," said Dick, mostly to himself.

"Shall we have another, or go?" Tony asked.

"I don't care," Dick said.

"We'll drink then," said Tony. "Might as well help the

management keep on its feet."

"Time, gentlemen, please," sang out the bushy-browed barman, wiping down the counter.

"When the gold in your hair meets the blue in your eyes," sang out the yellowing piano.

"Like a halo, tenderly," sang out Dick, tipping his glass on the floor.

"You've wasted a whole whisky, Dick," said Tony.

IT'S A LONG WAY TO GO

(A TRILOGY)

(1) CHANGE FOR DINNER

"YOU'LL have to put lance-corporal James on a charge, sir," the CSM said with a sneer in his eyes, "it's the second magazine your platoon has lost I'll help you to write out the charge sheet, sir "

"Yes," 2nd-Lieut. Greening replied, shuffling and anxious "Er—thank you, sergeant-major. Shall I do it now?"

"I've got to go now, sir It's my supper-time Leave it till to-morrow "

"Alright. Tomorrow. Goodnight."

"Good-night, sir "

A heel-click, a cut-away salute as sharp as a razor, still the gleam of contempt in the dark little Asiatic eyes, and the CSM marched out

Cowan, the company clerk, stood smiling with obsequious superiority Flat footed insurance clerk, he never left the office, never went on schemes, slept there, ate there, knew everything, typed everything, the CSM and the OC were regular soldiers, and therefore glad of a clever civilian to run the administrative side They disliked him, but gave him power He scorned and feared them, but enjoyed his submissive authority.

"These N.C.O.'s, sir," he said, condescendingly, "you can't trust them to keep a pair of bootlaces. They're hopeless, sir."

Damn the fellow, he's sneering at me, too, Greening thought. Oh, damn them all, damn them all. He wanted to get to his room and lie on his bed and get a grip on himself. I'm losing my grip, he repeated in his mind for the hundredth time that day, and every day.

"But they're not bad," was all he said. "They're browned-off, that's all. Where did I leave my cane?" He looked round. "Not here, is it?" (I'm losing everything, he thought, everything. Oh Christ!) Good-night, Cowan "

He wasn't going to listen to a lecture from Cowan tonight. He'd made the mistake of asking the fellow too many questions—on King's Regs. and postings and pamphlet amendments and even the characters of his own men. Cowan always replied with a Gladstonian oration, thumbs in his braces unless he was toasting the slice of bread he'd saved from his tea (I find a slice of bread completely satisfying at night, sir I never go to the canteen to guzzle cream buns like the rest of them, sir) Damn his frog's feet, and his conceit, and his white, horse's teeth.

He ran up to his bare little room, dropped his kit on the floor, rubbed water on his forehead and began biting his nails. His wife's photograph looked at him from the medley of pamphlets and files littering the trestle table (Darling, I'm so sorry. I'm so useless, so worthless) He opened his diary and looked at the list of tasks he'd made out before breakfast. "Phone M.O. re 18 Harris's medical board. Check platoon ammo. Collect rangecard. Paint gas detectors Toilet paper for billets. Write to factory for 27 Evans's wife to be released during his leave. Phone P.R.I.—can newspapers be bought for

men's billets? Prepare A.B.C.A. lecture." He'd ticked off three of them. The others he hadn't done. What a marvellous achievement! Actually three things done!

God, how he bullied himself. Never left himself alone. If only he could get into action, he knew he'd be alright then. Even if he died He knew he'd soldier alright. But this endless waiting, this normality in an abnormal life, letting things slide, lacking conversation in the Mess, knowing no dirty jokes, excusing himself from beer-crawls, never reading Jane in the *Mirror* or his horoscope on Sundays, eating more meat meals than his wife, doing less work than his collier-father—oh Christ, the weariness of it!

His wife smiled at him (Darling, I'm sorry I can't write to you I wish I was more of a husband to you, more of a man. Especially now the baby's coming It used to be alright, didn't it, when I was teaching in the Settlement and taking evening classes in the Boy's clubs, and we had wild roses for our wedding, and there was the constant active fight for a better world, for the pits to be reorganised and money coming into the grimy streets, and books and playreadings and hiking for the pale boys?).

He stood up, suddenly realising he was an infantry officer. Time for dinner What was Howells doing with his service dress? Arguing politics in the Naffy, most like He laughed to himself. Good old Howells, Red as they make them, always getting manifestoes signed to send greetings from the boys to their Russian comrades, always saluting with mocking smartness, always joking, always in debt.

Howells came hurrying in, nipping his fag at the door. His blue-pocked collier hands, powerful and gentle, passed the S.D. with its shining buttons to his "boss" "Here's your tit suit, sir,"

he grinned.

They were both from the same mining village in South Wales.

"How's the missus, Howells? I saw a letter for you in the office."

"Doin' fine, sir. And the baby. Comin' out of 'ospital Tuesday. Joe I'm going to call 'im Joe Stalin, see? Nice name, Joe, I've always thought I won't mind takin' my turn at wipin' 'is little bottom, neither sir, when the British Army can spare me for a few days."

The OC had refused to give Howells a short leave when his wife was taken to hospital. (Christ, what if every soldier had leave each time a baby was born? Get out GET OUT!) Howells had volunteered for paratroops the next day, not theatrically, but to find some loyalty which he could serve, some personal loyalty. (I'm finished here, sir. I only serve *men*).

"Look, Howells, send her this I'm flush this week. Go on Please send it. It isn't for you It's for her, man."

"I can't pay you back, sir I'm paying for the boots I let go beyond repair. I can't pay you back, sir."

"Take it, for the Lord's sake."

Howells took the pound note, and hid his embarrassment by picking up an ABCA pamphlet while his boss slipped his battle dress trousers off.

"They've gone into dinner, sir," he said "America's resources this week, is it? Good old Wall Street"

"Pass me my braces, Howells Never mind about the war"

"That's right, sir First things first You'll be saying 'Pass me my braces' when we're in the paratroops together, taking the jump." They both laughed

2nd-Lieut. Greening apologised for being late The O.C.

lifted his ravaged angry young face and nodded.

"Nothing unusual for a civilian," he said, and laughed humourlessly.

Greening found with exhilaration that he didn't care (Rats to you, sir).

"Just had a message from Battalion about you, Greening."

(Another dressing-down from the C.O. for failing to salute his car?)

"You're going on draft leave tomorrow Get your tropical kit on the way home." He took another helping of cheese. "Indian servants are bloody good, next best to the Chinese. But I don't suppose India's worth living in now, since Cripps went groveling there Still ——"

Greening put his spoon in his soup, tasted a slow mouthful.

She would have her baby without him. . . Yet he was glad to be going In a daze he felt the soup burn his throat. . . .
India It was a chance

(11) THE LAST DAY

HE had packed all his kit the night before, and when he woke up to see it all roped and piled ready for the P.U. to take him to the station he had a queer desolate feeling of being nobody, nowhere, an unknown man in the steerage or the railway waiting room, nameless It cost him an effort to recover himself He was leaving his company, going to India. Good. It was a relief to get away from them, the O.C. with his submerged dangerous power, sexual and symptomatic, the squat bull-shouldered C.S.M. who shouted into the men's faces, making them tremble in his bad breath; the lanky mournful second-in-command, querulous and absent-minded, always defensively

quick to snub his juniors for knowing more than he; it was a relief to get away. He felt like a new loaf of bread, rising in the oven.

The Adjutant rang up from Battalion at breakfast postponing his embarkation leave until he'd been inoculated. He was bitterly disappointed for a moment, but showed nothing to the others. They went on eating and reading. He got up fuming inwardly. Another day in their power. But only another day. Then home, even if he was sick after inoculation. Home. . . Yet he was glad to go. Even if India was as caste-ridden and 'regular' as the home forces, he was glad to go. It was a new field, a field in ferment. His will to serve would quicken there, like a worm climbing upwards in new earth. Here there was nothing to regret leaving. Withered boughs.

"As you're staying today you might as well be duty officer, Greening," the O.C. said, casual and malicious.

"Very good, sir." (Let him have his last stab if he wants it that way)

He began his tour of duty.

The company was defending a coastal radio-location station, patrolling the cliffs and the estuary day and night, manning the ack-ack guns along the beach, watching the sea and the grey eastern skies. He inspected the cookhouse, the barrack rooms with their neatly piled kits and folded blankets, the latrines, the stores. The men were parading in denims and balaclavas and scarves, mittens and gloves torn to bits with weeks of wiring, each man with a hunk of bread and margarine and cheese in his haversack for mid-day rations. They whispered and looked sideway at him as he passed. They seemed to know. . . They seemed to know. . . They whispered like schoolboys.

He went up through the wood, under the interlacing pines,

in the dark green aqueous shadows of the frozen wood, and out along the crawl trench across the last field in England. The wind beat at him, blowing with bared teeth from Europe, whipping the heavy grey seas through which a smudgy convoy slowly edged its way southwards. The radio masts, ten infant Eiffel towers, hummed like Jews' harps. Gulls hunched in the dead, blown grass, their necks ruffled, or were blown like newspapers over the cliffs, over the edge of the world, to scavenge among the rusted mines and scaffolding at the waves' tip. He felt a new and unexpected affection for these things, this was the way he would remember them.

The guard he wished to inspect was in the Martello tower where the cliffs fell down to the pea-green estuary whose flat black banks were littered with beached fishing craft and pleasure boats and tarred huts. He followed the frozen path along the hedge to the round sturdy Martello tower that for a century and a half had awaited the invader's armada, Christ, it was cold. He climbed the broken steps to the aperture on the first floor, entered the vaulted cellar with its thick central pier to which the guards' hammocks were slung, swaying slightly in the wind, then up the solid stone spiral to the roof. The guard were shivering and stamping their numb feet, great-coats and groundsheets flapping round their shoulders. They were glad to see him.

They were all three in his platoon. Their rough white faces grinned a welcome. Little Brunter with his imp's face peering from his balaclava and his yellow pointed teeth. Rowdy Ginger Morgan with his long bent nose and invisibly fair eyebrows, the joker of the platoon. And Pat Baker, hugely shaped, manly, independent, the best soldier in the company, but unable to read or write.

"So you're going, sir?" little Brunter ventured, grinning; he knew he was permitted to take liberties.

"There's not much you don't know, you fly one," he replied, laughing.

"The telephone orderly told us, sir."

"Did he, be damned? Well, he's quite right I'm off tonight"

"Want a batman to go with you, sir?" Ginger asked, like a friendly dog, rubbing his cold hands.

"You don't want to go to India, do you, Morgan? There won't be any rabbits for you to poach there, you know."

"Aye. No rabbits But there'll be women, sir"

"Women? A married man like you?"

"Not much use being married if somebody else is sleeping with your missus, is it, sir?"—he still grinned amiably, ingenuously "I know from my mates—there's a red-headed man same colour as me milking her every night Never be able to tell whose baby it is, see sir?"

1234597
"Gossip, that's all that is, Morgan" (God, say it's only gossip, but why does he grin so placidly, God alive?) "How's *your* wife now, Brunter?" Brunter had deserted three times to see his wife, tiny little bird-man that he was, it seemed funny he was so oversexed The redcaps had caught him naked under the bed the last time, he'd gone to detention for 120 days and was now only getting 7d a week wages. The rest of the platoon had a whip-round for him each pay day He never stopped grinning

The buzzer on the D5 field telephone interrupted them. Message to all units, along coast Hurricane fighter shot down at dawn five miles to sea. Pilot baled out. Keep watch Time of origin 0855.

Christ, it was a cold sea, rising all the time, white and rough.

Not much chance for a man in that.

"Poor bugger," Baker said quietly. He realised

India was as vast as the sea; but it was land. One could walk on it, run, breathe, think. Not be sucked down, choked, filled, emptied, annihilated. Who was he? Who was he, sucked down into the trough of the sea?

"I'll be glad when dinner time comes," Ginger Morgan said, shivering. "A hot meal is something like it on a day like this. They didn't ought to have a bleeding war in this weather, did they, sir?" He shuddered, looking at the waves piling against the screaming shingle bank, and then turned to take his leave.

"Well, goodbye, lads," he said. "Look after yourselves. And keep a look-out for that poor devil at sea. He's just as important as you are, Morgan."

"We'll watch out for him, sir, don't worry," Morgan grinned cheerfully.

"It won't be our fault if he drowns, sir."

"No, it's not your fault, Morgan, for once in your life," he chivvied.

"Well, solong again, lads."

"All the best, sir."

Baker came down the spiral stairs after him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, diffident yet not embarrassed.

"Yes, Baker?"

"I want to thank you special, sir, for learning me to read and write. I never thought I would, sir. But I can write to my missus myself now. It makes a lot of difference, sir."

"Good. Keep it up, won't you? And don't bother about thanks. Perhaps I'm more thankful than you. Anyway good-bye, Baker."

He hurried because of the cold, through the rustling belt of

withered sedge, along the frozen track to the wood, down through the trees. He knew they were watching him from the Martello, but he didn't look back. He didn't want to wave, and be sentimental, like a schoolboy leaving school after the headmaster's sententious farewell.

He went the round of the defence posts and wiring parties, was asked respectfully to estimate the age of a little field mouse one of the men was holding in his cracked red hands while the other argued and breathed over it; and took his farewell of them also.

Returning to the office he found the M.O. waiting to inoculate him. He rolled up his sleeve, thinking 'Now I can leave on the noon train.' The doctor offered to run him to the station. He asked the O.C. for permission "OK. Beat it." He loaded up, excited with new thoughts

Away, away. Sorry and glad, sorry and glad. Away, away, Sorry and glad. The car revving, the train rocking,, the telegraph posts falling past. Some vast thing, something universal, continuous. manifold, working tirelessly for good, moved in him, fortifying his uncertain impulses. He and the pilot who had baled out in the sea, and the three men in the tower, each in his way had a part in it, each in his way made manifest the mystery, each in his way.

(iii) THE MOON

HE began to grow anxious by the time his little train was well into the enfolding mountains of Mid-Glamorgan, panting and waiting aimlessly at each dirty station, crawling up the gradual gradients along the skirts of the bony hills, whistling like a policeman as it approached each grey terraced town and its

cluster of sidings, pit shafts, coal tips and advertisements. He was nearly home.

He was anxious because he couldn't get himself to realise it. Ten minutes by his watch, that was all, and she would be standing under the dim lamp by the ticket collector, and he would be saying "Hallo, darling" and "How are you, sweet?" and she'd want to carry some of his kit, and he'd argue with her because of the steep hill. And he was frightened that it wouldn't be *real*. The journey had been so unreal. all the way through Suffolk and Essex and London and Bucks and Wilts. and Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire, LNER., LPTB., GWR., unreal all of it. Reading the *New Statesman*, thinking in big filmy ideas of the economic wastage and Indian nationalism and British Imperialism, of British capitalism and Russian Socialism, of second fronts and khaki fascism, democracy and the old vexed trouble of the miners, his father and cousins and Left Book Club friends—that was one part of the journey. Another part was the continuous projection of camp routine and preoccupations, persistent as the rhythm of the train—the Bren magazine that was missing and still not accounted for, the site of the new trenches which he'd forgotten to show to his platoon sergeant, Baker writing a slow scarcely-legible letter to his wife, the need to buy tropical kit (he could have stopped in London and ordered it at the regimental tailors—Mrs. Jones the dressmaker was the only tailor where he was going; it would mean two journeys to Cardiff, damn and blast it), and the question of money. He would be getting 11/-day, she 4/-. How much could he allot her from his salary? How much did it cost to be pukka? Would she have enough money to pay the doctor and the nursing home, to buy Wincarnis and Ovaltine and a pram? Would she be able to have holiday by the sea when

the child was born? Would they send his kit allowance on in time?... It was a long crowded journey, he was tired and hungry. An inverted class-consciousness made him travel third despite his first-class travel voucher. He had sat in the corner all the time, reading, thinking, looking through the window without noticing much except houses, factories, fields, cattle, the Thames. Hungry and needing a wash; and now it was time to take his kit off the rack and buckle on his webbing. When would he tell her about India? His telegram had said simply "Coming on leave 830 Love David" He wouldn't tell her till he'd had a meal anyway. He wanted a meal, something tasty.

He caught himself thinking of food again. How romantic, he sneered. Didn't he realise he'd never be meeting her at the station again? She'd never be just a minute away from him again? He reasoned with himself. He was hungry, therefore it was quite natural to think of supper. But he knew it shouldn't be important now, it should be trivial. Instead of which it was like a great bowl of water, and Death and Love were two dried peas soaking in the bowl, no more.

The train screamed and slowed down, slid along the platform, and stopped. Yes, she was under the dim lamp, in her loose tweed coat (the smart black one would be too tight now), and the lamp was in her hair like gold. He jumped out, right behind her, and he said "Hallo darling." She turned and looked at him, and smiled, her hands were trembling. They crossed the black river by the footbridge. Oily black Cynon filthy with coal mines, fringed with scruffy trees. How beautiful it looked, black as ebony in the red and green lights of the railway and the hooded lamp of the bridge.

He put his arm gently round her waist and said "Are not

Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"

And she said, "Are you going abroad?"

"Why do you ask that?" he hedged.

"You weren't due for leave for another three weeks," she said. "Please tell me," she said, stopping at the edge of the bridge, putting her palms on his chest, leaning to him.

"I can't talk with all this kit on me," he said

"Where are you going?" she asked, holding his eyes in her insistent gaze

„India," he said. It was a little word, wasn't it? Five letters

"Darling," she said, resting against him, bowing her head on his trench coat between the shiny buttons. The weight and warmth of her. And in her nearness he felt her suffering quiver like heat on an sun-lashed road. He *knew* then; it smote him—an enormous tearing, a deep personal guilt. He had been so casual about it to himself, irresponsible, glad to go

"Your supper'll be drying to a cinder," she said then. "Come on "

The kettle was boiling on the grid, the black kitten hiding under her fireside chair, the table laid in the kitchen for two. A clean snow-white towel in the scullery, which was also the bathroom. She had been knitting—white woolly things this time, not khaki. She put the news on for him while she dished up the cottage pie. She made everything so normal. The news was normal, too. The last imperial troops had crossed the Johore causeway from the mainland. One of our fighters shot down off the East coast, but the pilot was safe.

Good God! he started up, jubilant suddenly.

"He's safe," he said, very happy suddenly

"Who?" she asked.

"We were watching for that pilot all the morning," he said. "It was such a rough sea, I didn't think he had a chance. Hooray!"

"Good omen," she said, half to herself.

They didn't sit up long after washing the supper plates. She put the kitten outside for five minutes, tidied the kitchen, put away her knitting, called the kitten in and put it in its bed in the duster box, and took his hand.

"Come and sleep, darling," she said.

He undressed quickly and lay on the pillow watching her slip her nightdress over her head and step out of her vest and comb her fair stubborn hair. She didn't comb the pucker out of her eyes, the nervous tension there. Her actions were very calm, though, controlled.

"I'm sorry for you, going out there *by yourself*," she said when he had put out the light.

He kissed her, hushing her, stroking her head

"It's such a big country," she said. And then, after a long silence, "there's nothing I can do, absolutely nothing, darling is there?"

"But of course there is. You've got everything to do. You've got the little girl. And me, too," he whispered

She was silent a little.

"She's an awful little girl," she said. "She makes me disgustingly sick. She's nearly as much trouble as you are."

They were both thinking of India in the darkness. He could only think of clichés, meaningless, unevocative. "Teeming millions," he murmured.

They laughed a little in the darkness.

"The moon comes up in about two hours," she said.

"Go to sleep now," she said, putting her arm under his head,

drawing his head down to her mouth.

When he woke the moon was a soft gold on the wall. The pattern of roses, the little Gauguin *Riders to the Sea* with its pink sands and the long shadow from its frame, the dark bars of the window frame. He lay quietly, knowing she was awake.

After a while he said "Can't you sleep much these days, darling?"

"I sleep in the afternoons sometimes," she said

She kissed his hair.

"You're sweating," she said. "Your hair's quite damp Please look after yourself for me"

When he had come on leave at other times they had acted like strangers, not understanding each other somehow. It was terrible, the coldness that wouldn't melt for days sometimes, and which they never mentioned, although they knew it was there. In his sleep he would give fire orders and tell men to take cover. And she lay awake, listening, holding a stranger in her arms, as if in charity.

This time there was no strangeness. It was good fortune. She had touched the life in him in that little pause on the bridge. And she was content if he were wholly hers, just for this little while.

"The moon will be out there, too, won't it?" she said.

"Yes, darling," he said, wanting to cry. "Yes, it's everywhere."

LANCE-JACK

(1)

AFTER the inflamed vulgarity and ugly tempers of the last hour, when the sergeant asked us whether we had any complaints, it is soothing and cool to talk things over intelligently to my *chance* companions at the mess table. One an insurance clerk, the other a private secretary to a biggish wig I'd never met them before. They are both married, one of them says his wife is expectant. We chat together about the army, we think the same more or less—field manoeuvres which might do very well for the Roaring Forties and the Covered Wagon, even for the last two years of the Boer War, even for the Chinese *franc-tireurs* in Japanese-occupied territory. But not for a vast army in training for an encounter with Germany's tanks and air-supported infantry.* We think perhaps things will improve as Morrison and Churchill get going. Anyway we are curiously impersonal, considering the imminent destruction of Fortinbras and all his braves. A soldier is always impersonal. That's the only way to preserve any privacy in conditions where one is never alone. Eight in a tent, lying on groundsheet, feet to the tentpole, kit piled high and in small space by one's side. Writing letters, looking at snaps, cutting toenails, sewing buttons, contemplating something distant,

* Written in May, 1940

brooding over something immediate It is all impersonal. The other seven don't notice, don't interfere

The soldier is non-political. He doesn't talk about Germany but only about Jerry When he becomes political, it is ugly. A primitive patriotism, refusing any quarter, burning eyes We'll wipe them out, the *swine* We can take it, and hit back, by Christ. . But I haven't met many of that sort The vast majority are kind and impersonal The boys straight back from Dunkirk, bearded and dirty and slightly wounded and tired to death I shall never forget how quiet their voices were, amenable as children, waiting for an hour and more till the bacon was found and cut and fried, or talking about it all as they lay in the sun outside the pub "It's marvellous, seeing the houses all standing, and the milkman coming down the lane there," one of them said He rubbed his forehead "They're *all* mad over there," he said, pointing with his thumb towards the channel.

In the Army you begin again All you were seems to have vanished It was simply another mode of life Civvy Street I was a school-teacher in a big secondary school, a responsible and exacting job Now I clean lattines, windows, barrack rooms, run errands for snooty little office clerks with a stripe on their arms, listen to filthy talk shouted from bed to bed, suffer a series of violent reactions, dismay that democracy has such a rough edge, bewilderment, sickness for two or three people whom I long for by my side, fatigue at having to begin again, to get to know people again, and again and again no doubt, feeling uprooted, unreal, dull and without conversation, reluctant to begin again In some ways it is a good point from which to start, this sudden *levelling down* Millions are facing it in Europe, in a much acuter form than I I am not hungry,

nor ill-clothed and shod But the Poles, the Balts, the Germans in the Balkans and Russian Poland, and the refugees, they are bewildered by this nightmare of strangeness, of newness, broken homes, useless qualifications, forced labour, distance. They will have to wake and live this nightmare. It is incredibly, unforgivably cruel, inhuman, harsh—to the old, to the sick, to mothers and wives going alone But to the young and the bold it is the loudest challenge ever sounded on the trumpets of the wind Conventions go, respectability, narrowness, the suburban train and the Sunday best Those who were trapped are forced to be free of the old routine Those who were happy are forced to be unhappy, conscripted into a new way of life Everyone will realise sooner or later that nothing is fixed, nothing inevitable They will realise the possibility of change Many long-standing abuses will no longer be able to conserve themselves

But it is dangerous, too The soldier doesn't bother He is a migrant, an Arab, taking his belongings with him, needing surprisingly little of the world's goods He leaves his violin and his Cezanne and his garden behind His wife, too, and his children, as time passes Hitler's soldiers have been taught two simple things Obey Commands, Forget Home In the long run these two rules are easier to learn than to resist That is the danger That is why I say, to women, feel less, to men, feel more I may be exaggerating this danger. Certainly the soldier's heart leaps for leave But when I go home on leave I feel vaguely "out of it" The new carpet doesn't thrill me as it should, the troubles and little quarrels with neighbours are no longer my troubles, they are the preoccupations of strangers I feel sympathetic, I listen and suggest But I don't interfere, I don't trespass on them And perhaps they think I don't talk

much, don't open up, don't confide Until one of them divines the reason, and knows me as a stranger, and takes me in as a stranger, into her lonely arms We talk quietly of strangenesses, night marches, bivouacs, odd and far-off incidents, Europe Till our loneliness is complete, and we are united in loneliness, just the two of us, as it used to be when first we sought each other, losing and finding each other, never quite giving in, never quite defeated

The soldier says "Life is a series of meetings with strangers We are all strange, to ourselves as well"

That is true But it is dangerous, like cynicism For sometimes when he is utterly alone, utterly impersonal, on guard in the night at some outpost, somewhere, he can only envisage the human past, the great centrifugal force of the heart which draws into its orbit and unites in love all differences of people, mother and sweetheart, friend and pauper, employer and baby daughter, I say he can only envisage this great power of life as a swarming of bees on a bough, of flies on a fallen damson, a noisy, slightly indecent congress A complex, if you prefer

And if you ask why a man appears to prefer what is casual, rough, hazardous and incomplete to what is warm and personal and loving, I suggest you read Edward Thomas's poems again It is, if you like, curious that the idealist should live casually with regard to himself and the preservation of himself, that he should find the haversack, the trench, the journeying, most suited to the pursuit of high ends Christ had no home Women dislike, even hate this quality in their men It is the overturning of all that was so hard and slow to win, the gradual building up of friendship, love, mutual knowledge, home, children, the rooted beauty of flowers, budding and opening in petal and colour and curve *in one place* But it is

a fine quality, in the best men And there is always, it seems,
some suffering There is Beethoven as well as the nine sympho-
nies Man or woman, each must discover the balance of forces
And now that the women are being bombed in their homes
while the men are untouched in their trenches and tents, per-
haps there will be less hatred among the women that their
men should leave them to follow something else It is a new
way of *life*

(11)

THESE things I am going to write are about the imagination,
I have found them here and there in my scribblings They
are not poems The poems I have elsewhere I don't want
these to be poems, for they are fragmentary, not all of me,
as the dance-song says

When I am walking back at night through the wet streets
and the darkness I hear the tramp of heavy boots The tramp
of heavy boots drowns the sound of all other footsteps

I wonder whose footsteps they are I listen carefully

I discover with surprise and a growing excitement that they
are mine I grow slowly more and more pleased with the sound
of my hobnailed boots, drowning the bare and bleeding foot-
falls of the beggars and the refugees who slink down the side
streets as I approach Heil Hitler

But now I am scared, now I am frightened, and now terrified
of the sound of my heavy boots They silence all other sounds
I am terrified they will start running

Gott, O Gott

In the middle of the city the Emperor had a great cemetery

planned, in the shape of a circle, with a circular paved road running round it. At night, in the drizzle, I walk round and round the cemetery, along the circular road, and I do not know when to stop walking round and round the silent and eternal cemetery. I envy the dogs barking and frisking and sleeping among the graves, rooting up shinbones, gnawing contentedly and ignorant of all implications.

Where is my rightful place in which to sleep what is left of this dark night?

Not in my sweetheart's bed, for she has locked her father's door in my face, saying it is not proper for the unmarried to sleep together.

Nor in my lodgings, the garret where I have lain awake these last five nights, tossing and feverish and foolish, for I do not want to return there for a sixth time.

I will lie down and sleep among the rank grasses and the dripping nettles of the common then, midway between my sweetheart's and my lodgings.

It is cold and damp on the common. The ground is hard and lumpy and my body wakes with stiffness and dampness. The mist makes me cough.

My sweetheart does not love me, if she did she would come and discover me, and lie beside me, warming my nostrils with her breath, like new hay that steams a little in the sun.

My sweetheart has refused what I offered her. Yet I have lost what I offered her, somewhere I have lost myself.

There is nothing left of me save my indestructibility, a small hard thing in my head, a stone the size of my fist. I can feel its hardness behind my eyes, aching.

There is no love.

I am cold and lost and hard among the dew-wet thistles and

the rank dripping grasses and the useless weeds, God's forgotten ideas God is cold and sullen, gloomy, unhuman.

And slowly he is fashioning man in his own image

Every day it becomes easier for us to slay each other without cant, without feeling very much at all

Their smiles are fixed and difficult to acquire, they do not alter their expression once it is made up, no matter how alarming are the headlines in the morning paper And they die with white faces, saying nothing, only trembling a little, almost imperceptibly, with premonitions of the past

They are the martyrs.

Your eyes are bright with anguish, bright as stones, and a network of veins stands out hard on your ravaged, still beautiful face But the leaves blossom above you where you lie abject, and the sedge grows green around you, Europe And out of the springing wood your tiny children running and tumbling, dragging their kites and singing the songs of the soldiers

The trout do not hear the cruel violent speeches of the ambitious perverters But in the deep water under the alder roots the trout taste the curious taint of blood in the river water.

The rooks scatter with the turbulence in the sky The starlings and sparrows, and all animals are frightened at this new manifestation of hostility But they also quickly forget

When Virgil led Dante down into the darkness there were many who tore at his garments and begged him to help them get back, back home They tore the hem of his garments to ribbons, and dirtied it with their filthy hands Some who were humble lay at his feet and said nothing because they feared to be refused and dared not give their vast impossible longing the power of words over them And others lay quietly, and

with soft eyes seemed to say, "Hail and farewell, speed your troubles. We are of the darkness Leave *us*. Leave *us*."

They were the exiles, like Dante

The loafers at the street corner will tell you the places where you may forget, they are easy to find and there everyone is agreeable, out to please, and it is not too costly

But there is no-one to go with you to the place of remembering

You went there alone, didn't you, Judas Iscariot, my friend

(111)

THE long-legged tough Aussie having a beer by the roadside with us.

"My wife said, 'I know you'll have a good time I don't care anything but that you'll come home again the same as you went' I said 'Let's change the talk to something about food'"

"Got a bit drunk last night, Joey, got in late Duty officer there started giving me whatfor I said to him, 'Don't sack me, boss Jess gi'me good talking to'"

"You wouldn't believe what it was like The voyage was so long, see? I felt I'd left my wife and kids for good, as if I'd got no line on them no more But when I tried a woman in London it wasn't no good I kept thinking of my wife when I was messing her about It's funny. You wouldn't understand"

Sid has been in trouble Got into a fight in a pub and was reported by the red-caps "What was it all about, Sid?" I asked "Oh, *he* said it was an Alarm and I said it was the All Clear

I thought he was right and he thought I was right So we fought it out" He was tried by the Company O.C.

"What did you get, Sid?" I asked when he came out, marched out, rather, between the two escorting corporals

"Read all abaht it in to-night's special," he said in a quavering old-vendor's voice

Sid was on sentry duty when Jerry dive bombed He was the only one to get it Shrapnel

It seems so unfair Such an infinitesimal gain for the enemy, such a terrible, absolute loss for his wife

Khaki and discipline and angry imperatives are apt to overawe and frighten—yes, frighten—the recruit But it isn't so godalmighty, really One of the corporals saw me reading a book of poetry the other day He said "Do you like poetry?" I flushed and looked at him for a moment to see what he was playing at Then I said 'Yes Why?'

"Oh, nothing," he said Then he looked at me like a little boy confessing a longing for your apples "I like it, too," he said "I like writing it, at least I never read any I write a lot, though Every letter I write to my girl I put a poem in it Of course some of them are pretty soft, but now and again they're really good She was proper nuts about one I wrote last week Pretty intimate it was—about having a baby She copies them up into a notebook In INK Tell me, can you have verses longer than four lines? Or have they got to be four lines?"

In any case, the Army is only an improvisation on a vast scale There's bound to be some rough edging, and some pretty poor stuff, here and there There are certainly plenty of friends. They come to you from Borstal and the Royal College of Music, from the Great War and the Spanish War, and anywhere else It's a fine life in that way. There are a few snobs

—crane drivers and navvies occasionally sneer at “bloody clerks, bloody school-teachers” But mostly it’s democracy alright, mending the holes in its socks and sharing the parcel from home and showing photographs and being disconcertingly vulgar and humorous, ignorant and amazingly experienced, and calm, happy-go-lucky

There are also Saturday afternoons and Sundays’, if you’re lucky not to get pinched for fatigues or guard duty The mere in the valley of pine trees has a profound stillness In the afternoon sometimes there are a few soldiers bathing there and lying in the sun. Young boys talking driftily about the ATS girls, what they’re like—“if they’ve got to have ATS why don’t they have them all smashers?”—and about the blue dragonflies which flicker on the still water, abrupt electric turns, vivid colour, then utter stillness settled suddenly on a thin blade of green, the long thin pipe of the body dipped in the water, the four transparent wings extended and still, sleeping on the flat heart-shaped sensuously-thick lily leaves or more fittingly on the wonderfully white spiked petals over the secretly open golden heart of the flower, or flying in pairs, tail to head fastened together, “Look at them dragonflies capitulating, the dirty dogs,” says one of Seurat’s bathers, tiring of the ATS

I wish I could write a poem about dragon-flies It would be like a schoolboy’s face as he watched the mercury for the first time, in the great glass beaker of water

At evening the mere is utterly still The tangled rust-green underwater grasses cannot be seen from the top of the valley Only the mirror of water, pure blue and magenta in the intense clearness of evening, the mere holds it all And I think of Dick and Bill and Gweno and home and watch the advent of the heron, its steady wing-sweep, its legs and neck out-

stretched and calm, circling slowly the mere which it sees as I see it, a mirror of rest, a breast for the dark and silent visitant But it is deterred by the laughter of soldiers and girls, and goes as I am going, elsewhere

On the way back to camp I catch up with a hedgehog He has thin, dragging hind legs covered with loose brownishpurple skin, four claws like tubercular roots, a little black snout, pointy, and beady intelligent eyes, hunched over a grub

His nostrils blow little soap-bubbles of terror and his breath hisses when I prod him gently with a stick Sacrilege

It's only because I am alone that I touch him like this I wouldn't have yielded to such a private intimate impulse had I been in company But alone we are more primitive, more natural 'We regard our faces in the mirror and examine the colour of our eyes, and touch the downy hair on our arms, ruffling it Then I continue my way back over the downward sloping heather, and I am no longer alone The forest is blue and hazy with warmth and distance, like lavender, and the sandy path runs forward to the cluster of tents on the open heath I see only the distance, the forest, and I half forget my khaki and imagine myself an itinerant preacher, one of the old revivalists of the eighteenth century, of my own country, Wales Hywel Harris perhaps, or Thomas Charles, crossing the mountains to the waiting hearth Or a lover in a Hardy novel, fifty years ago, on this same path, Tess lonely and hurt, Jude instinctively seeking loneliness

Do you know how quietly I sleep, on my groundsheet, between my three dirty blankets, in the crowded tent?

PART TWO

8

THE WANDERERS

THE heat inside the caravan was too much for her. The wooden wallboards were warped and the blue paint bubbled and flaked by the burning high noon. She fell asleep in the middle of stitching a corner of the red quilt over a tear in the boy's trousers. Running up the steps in nothing but his rough green jersey, the boy found her lolling open-mouthed in the chair, beads of sweat on her pale face. He twined his grubby fingers in the fall of her black hair and pulled gently.

"Wake up, mam," he said, "Dad's coming across the fields."

She woke with a start, surprised to find herself sleeping.

"Jewks!" she muttered, rubbing her eyes. "I'm that sleepy. Where is he, Micah?"

"Just crossing the river," Micah replied. "He's got two rabbits."

"We'll have a change from bread and dripping, then," she said, yawning.

"Here, let's finish this path. You've not ben out like that, have you?"

"Only to the river," he answered. "I seen a dragon-fly an' followed him till he pitched. Look!" He opened his grimy fist to show the crumpled corpse of a yellow-barred dragon-fly. Grey-pink matter oozed from its long tail and congealed on his palm.

Revolted, she slapped his face.

"Oh! Micah, you cruel," she shouted, her face twisted up; "you mustn't ——"

The boy was weeping passionately, hiding his face in her black frock

"It's the gipsy blood you've got from your father," she said. She stood so still And then, suddenly, she saw that he was weeping and hiding for shame in her body Swiftly she stooped over him and lifted him into her arms

"Micah, Micah," she murmured, kissing his hair and running her hands over his naked buttocks and down his almond brown legs "There, there, stop crying, my darling"

"Stop dandling the kid, for Christ's sake," the gipsy shouted She shivered and almost dropped the boy He had come in so quietly

"He was nigh choking," she said, sullenly Her voice was hard and reserved Micah had stopped crying and stood in the corner, trying to stifle the sniffling sobs that broke from him

"You'll make a woman out of him," the gipsy sneered "Coddling the boy! Cover your arse up, boy, before I bruise it for you"

Micah hastily grabbed his trousers and, sitting on the floor, pulled them over his legs

"Sell any pegs this morning?" the gipsy asked

She pointed to the bed

"There's one and six under the mattress," she said, almost scornfully

He lifted up the mattress, took the money out and counted the coppers slowly She watched his greasy brown hands fumbling over the coins.

"Good," he grunted "I sold two bobs' worth myself Christ, it's hot"

He unlaced his boots and stretched his swollen red toes
His thick curly hair lay in a mat of sweat on his forehead
His beady brown eyes were brilliant with heat.

"There's an ironmonger selling out in the town," he said
"Promised to sell me sixty tin boilers for ten bob I said I'd call back for them

"We haven't got ten shillings," she answered, looking out from the caravan door at the blue haze on the hills

"I can pawn something," he said

"Pawn what?" she asked Her back was towards him, her voice listless

The young corn was blue and still before her eyes A slash of poppies burnt a red wound across the field

"I was thinking it would be worth it, just for two days," he said, cautiously "We'd make a quid on the selling and then I'd recover them"

"What?" she said

"Your ear rings," he ventured

"Alright," she said, swinging her foot nonchalantly
He had expected a quarrel But instead of being relieved at her acquiescence, he was angered by her indifference

"I'll take them now, then," he snapped "And get them rabbits skinned and in the pot 'gainst I come back Where the hell has that boy gone? "Micah!" he shouted

No reply He ran down the steps, calling again

"What're you doing under there, in Christ's name?" he snarled, pulling the trembling child from under the caravan
Micah cringed

"What's two and two?" the gipsy asked, holding him by his hair

Micah did not reply.

"What's two and two?" the gipsy repeated, threateningly
Micah's lips quivered

"Four," said the gipsy, "one—two—three—four," shaking
the boy at each count "You're a *fine* scholar Get on and help
your mother skin them rabbits"

Micah ran up the steps to his mother He looked up at her,
but she was looking fixedly across the fields The gipsy turned
away without a word and set off along the hedge

It was a mile to the town, down Lovers' Walk by the river
and across the common The children stopped their cricket
to watch the lean, dark stranger in the garish blue smock coat
They gathered fearfully together until he had passed Gipsies
steal little boys and take them away in their caravans, vanishing
mysteriously into the wide other world He passed the crowd
of farmers outside the cattle market and climbed the steep
shopping street Ladies in white frocks stood under the window
shades outside the milliners' and confectioners' shop A podgy
barman stood at the door of "The Wheatsheaf," sunning him-
self between hours Children clustered round an ice-cream
barrow The tar melted on the road, burning the gipsy's feet
He turned down a side street and entered a tobacconist's A
shrivelled little Jew with scant, mousy hair and watery, peering
eyes popped up ingratiatingly from behind the counter
His withered smile hardened as he looked at the gipsy

"We-ell," he wheezed, rubbing his hands dubiously together

"I want to pawn these ear rings," the gipsy said, fishing
them out from his deep, poaching pocket and laying them
on the counter

The Jew bent over them, fondling them with his skinny
fingers The gipsy could only see the red tip of his pointed
nose

"Six shillings?" The Jew raised his puckered face

"Ten," the gipsy said

The Jew lowered his discoloured eyes to the ear rings A dray rumbled past The Jew looked out on to the sunlit street and saw a pile of steaming horse dung outside the door

"One minute," he said, "excuse me, please" He fetched a bucket and spade from the kitchen at the back of the shop, shuffled hurriedly into the street, scooped the manure into the bucket, and returned into the shop, smiling

He put the bucket in the kitchen and shuffled back to the counter, rubbing his hands on his trousers

"Well then, eight," he said

"Alright," the gipsy replied

The Jew counted the silver into the gipsy's palm

"I'll reclaim them in three days," the gipsy said, placing the receipt and the money in his trousers pocket

'Very good, sire, very good,' the Jew wheedled, "a nice day, isn't it?"

The gipsy spat on the doormat as he went out He went straight to the ironmongers, who promised to deliver sixty boilers at the caravan in the evening, and then, after a pint at "The Wheatsheaf," the gipsy made his way out of the town

During the next four days the caravan covered twenty miles, the tin boilers and cans rattling like skeletons in corrugated iron coffins as the skinny piebald slipped and stumbled down the stony lanes They were following the river to the coast, selling their ware at farms and cottages and villages The gipsy was in a good mood, for they were selling well and he enjoyed walking at the horse's head even more than haggling

He let Micah sit on the mare's back when the road was flat, and he whipped the heads off the hedgerow dandelions and

sang to himself By the end of the fourth day there were only two boilers unsold They decided to spend the night in a little pasture by the river, and after unharnessing the mare and tethering her to a hazel, the gipsy stripped and swam in the stream The cold green water seemed to flow through him, dissolving his tired, sweaty body into energy and delight He climbed onto the bank and lay in the long grass, biting off the leaves of sorrel with his teeth and tasting the bittersweet juice on his tongue Micah was playing near him, yellow as a bee with rolling in the buttercups His wife was sitting hunched up on the steps of the caravan

"Hoah, hoah, hoah," a girl's clear voice made him sit up in surprise

"Hoah, hoah, hoah," strong and bell-like and vibrant Ah! there she was, two fields away, calling the cattle in The reddening sun caught her obliquely so that one side of her was light, fleshly, quick, the other silhouetted darkly Light and shadow moved over her as she walked The gipsy pulled on his trousers and shirt, laced up his boots, and returned to the caravan He tied a scarlet muffler round his neck, combed his hair back, and hooked the two remaining cans on the crook of his arm

"There's a farm over the fields," he said "I'll try and sell these"

His wife nodded without lifting her bowed head

With light springy steps he followed the girl The cows were walking in a line before her, tossing their heads at the swarming flies, their full udders swinging against their hind legs The gipsy caught her up as she was entering the cowshed She looked at him boldly.

"Would your mistress need any cans!" the gipsy asked, his

voice silken and lilting

"Mistress is at market, she replied, pressing her full hips against the lower half of the cowshed door and stretching back a little. Her breasts pressed against her cotton blouse, strong and round, melting the gipsy's composure into an aching tumult of desire.

"Well, do *you* want anything?" he asked, the wild blood burning in his fingers and flushing into his neck.

"I've got no money for nothing," she laughed. Her teeth were white, Christ, they were white, close against her lips, her full, laughing lips and her fresh cheeks and her bright dark-flecked eyes. The gipsy smiled. His face was devout and eager, even when he smiled.

"I'll milk your cows for nothing," he said.

"Are you a careful one?" she asked, tossing her head back.

"Yes, I'll be careful," he said.

She opened the cowshed door and he followed her in. The shed was low and warm with the fodder and the cow's breath and the sweat of their bodies. The darkness was rich and luminous, as though it were cloudy with purple, intangible grapes. The chains rattled as the haltered cattle turned restlessly in the mangers, waiting to be milked.

The gipsy's wife came up to the farm with three pennies and an empty jug, wanting a pint of milk. From the gate she saw the girl come out of the shed, picking the straw off her shoulders and pulling her dress into shape. The gipsy came out after her, brushing his hair back with his hand and caressing the girl with his eyes. He did not see his wife, and she turned back with the empty jug and made her way behind the hedge to the caravan. When she got back to the river she found Micah talking to a swarthy, dark-haired man. He wore a black flannel

shirt and brown corduroy trousers, his chin was covered with a light stubble and his eyes were bright as blackberries. He looked up when he heard her step and smiled, looking swiftly at her body. She was breathing heavily, her bosom heaving.

"He's a Frenchman, mam," Micah said portentously. "Aren't you, mister?"

The man laughed, caught Micah by his leg and wrist and swung him up and down.

"Pas tout-à-fait, mon vieux," he said. "Je suis Breton—plus gallois que Français."

"Can you tell what he's saying, mam?" Micah asked.

She smiled. "I can't understand," she said.

Her face was dark and engrossed, her eyes filmy.

"You are dreaming of what?" asked the Breton.

"Eh?" she turned to him, her face suddenly aware and passionate.

"Your thought was absent," he said.

"Yes." She laughed breathlessly. Her eyes knotted again.

"You are a peddler like me?" the man asked.

She saw a smooth, rounded pole in the grass, notched at each end, with long strings of onions lying beside it.

"Johnny Onions?" she asked.

"Yes," he laughed. "Johnny Onions. I leave my family in Brittany, I sail with my brother to Cardiff. I sell my onions across Wales, making friends with the little boys. This pullet—is he a gipsy?"

Micah tugged at her skirt, but she ignored him.

"Half and half," she said. "His father is a gipsy—he used to live with the Pembroke tribe. I'm Welsh—my father is a farmer."

"You speak nice," the Breton said.

"I went to school," she answered, and paused "I didn't learn enough to keep me out of trouble, though" She laughed He looked at her for a moment in silence

"You like this life?" he asked

She tugged nervously at the grass

"Mam, look at this ladybird," Micah said, lifting his supped hand She did not hear

"I do not like living in a house," she said

The Breton stretched his sunburnt arms above his head

"Well, I go before dark," he said

"Stay and eat with us," she said suddenly

He looked into her dark, brooding face "Better I go," he said

"No, stay," she begged It was as though he caught a sudden glimpse of Hell Her eyes and lips, the very look of her, were momentarily alive with a dark intense passion, as if night had broken into a wild, translucent dawn and still remained night Her mood enveloped him like heat, filtering through his body, creeping through the roots of his hair Micah put his arms round her neck, tightly, and bit into the white flesh at the nape of her neck She screamed as his teeth cut through her skin and sprang to her feet, shaking the child off her back Micah cowered on the grass, quivering like an animal She stood over him, pale, her hand fingering the wound in her neck For a second she stood, tense and trembling Then she threw herself full length in the grass and her shoulders shivered with sobs The Breton knelt over her, laid his hands on her hair, caressed her

"It is alright, my darling," he said "It is alright Do not please ——"

Micah caught his hand

"Don't touch her," he hissed

"What's up?" The gipsy stood over them. He walked as silently as a fox

"The little boy bite his mother," the Breton said

The gipsy bent down, his fist clenched Micah had turned limp and sallow The gipsy hit him with his fist The boy gasped He was limp as a jelly The gipsy hit him again and again, ferociously Then he straightened his back and looked down at the sprawling woman and the kneeling man

"Johnny Onions?" he asked

The Breton nodded "Your wife ask me to stay to eat," he said, "eat my onions, eh?"

The gipsy laughed Warmth flooded back into his body and he swung his arms

"Sure, stay We'll eat fried onions together" He touched his wife with his boot "Come on," he said, "I'll light a fire"

The Breton put his hands under her armpits and lifted her to her knees She got up lithely to her feet and entered the caravan, keeping her face averted Micah slipped off, crouching, into the copse The gipsy opened his clasp knife, cut three beech branches, tied the tops together with a length of wire, sharpened the other ends and stuck them into the ground to make a three-legged stand for the kettle He worked dexterously, whistling between his teeth, engrossed and happy The Breton watched the woman busying herself with cups and bread and frying pan Micah returned with an armful of dry brushwood and gorse and laid it by his father The gipsy looked up, smiled at him Micah's face was white and serious

"Little weasel," the gipsy mocked

The gipsy talked and laughed a lot as they ate the fried onions He did not grumble that there was no milk for the

tea He told the Breton tale after tale of his youth with the Pembroke tribe He showed a blue weal down his side, the country folk called them Furies His wife looked coldly at his animated face Micah sat close to her side his face shining in the firelight, his hand resting on her knee Now and again he regarded the two men opposite him—his father and the strong, tawny Johnny Onions—and edged nearer the soft warmth of his mother She covered his small hand with her own and watched unobserved the fire flickering over the stranger's face

When the meal was finished she put Micah to bed in the caravan, set a dry stump on the dying fire, and stayed listening to the talk of the two men The Breton was working his way down the coast to Cardigan There he would meet his brother and together they would return to Cardiff, selling in the coast towns of Pembroke and Carmarthen It was not as pleasant as Brittany, at home there were friends in the evenings, "bons copains", but better than starving, or working in a Paris factory He choked in the city

The gipsy lay back and yawned

"I'll sleep out here to-night," he said drowsily "It's too hot to sleep indoors You sleep on the grass too, Johnny?"

"Hay after harvest dead and soft," the Breton laughed, "before the harvest sweet and hard I sleep on my feet easy"

The gipsy yawned and turned comfortably onto his side

"Goodni," he said thickly

They sat still by the fire, watching the flames dancing red and blue and yellow over the crackling wood Occasionally a red ash leaped into the air with a small explosion and floated up into the purple dusk and lost its fire The meadow was silent, washed with the scent of leaves and grasses, tremulous

with the down-pressing night The Breton looked up from the fire and caught her looking at him. He nodded with his head into the darkness and the fire sang out in his eyes She stood up and softly walked across the gorse towards the river The trees on the bank were masses of intenser dusk. She could hear the river swirling through the naked alder roots The sound of it drowned the rustle of the grass against the Breton's boots but she was aware of his coming with all her body When he put his hand on her shoulder she turned in to him and leaned against his body, her cheek tingling with the feel of his rough flannel shirt and the rise and fall of his breathing

"You are not an easy woman," he whispered, "you do not do this before "

"Never," she replied, letting her hand move down his cheek and his neck until it rested on the warm hard flesh of his shoulder. "But he and I—we are nothing now."

"Why?" he asked

She shrugged her shoulders

"But that is not why I am with you," she said. Her voice was urgent

"Why then?" he asked

She did not reply Then she said, "If my husband wakes, he will kill me "

He could feel how the tide had set in her He laughed gutturally and it engulfed them both. .

Afterwards, lying under the trees, listening to the water, she was silent

"Best go back," he whispered

She started "I had forgotten," she said, and in a panic, starting up, "you won't leave me tomorrow, will you?"

He laughed She heard him plucking the grass It sounded

callous, the sound of taking and not giving.

"Tomorrow, yes. I meet my brother in Cardigan after three days"

"No," she shuddered, holding him in a passion. He tilted her head back.

"Best to go," he said, kissing her lips. "If he finds us ——"

There was a rustle in the long grass and he sprang back from her. She did not move, in terror. Then a plop in the water and a rat came swimming downstream. "Sainte Marie," he breathed, his voice quivering.

She went back by herself. The gipsy was lying by the dead fire as she had left him, and she slipped past him into the caravan. She stripped and climbed softly into bed. She put her hand out and touched Micah's naked little body. He wriggled close to her, put his arms round her bosom and hid his head in her breasts.

The leaves were gold and dancing in the early sun when Micah woke her.

"Come on, mam," he said, shaking her head. "You be a cabbage and I'll be a caterpillar and you scream when I eat you ——" She sat up.

"Look how fine it is," she said, her sleepy eyes dazzled with the tossing of light from the leaves onto the innumerable blue spear heads of the sky. Then she remembered the night and sat still. She threw the quilt off and dressed quickly, not wanting her husband to see her naked. Then she went to the door. He had lit the fire, the kettle was singing.

"I was just going to call you," he said. "Do some breakfast while I go for a swim."

"Where's the Johnny Onions?" she asked.

He looked up shrewdly "You sound excited," he said
She was afraid he had gone "I just wanted to know," she said

"Well, he's over in the trees," he replied, smirking, "doing his business Send Micah out I'll take him swimming with me "

She went into the caravan and lifted Micah out of bed

"Off with you, snake's body," she said He ran out naked into the sunlight The Breton had come back and he greeted Micah cheerily, holding his arms out, asking the boy to play pig-a-back Micah shrank away, hanging his head and frowning The Breton laughed

"Sulker," he mocked, pulling his ear Micah broke loose and ran after his father The long grass reached to his thighs as he bobbed like a naked little cupid across the meadow

"Why are you crying?" his father asked "Afraid of the water?"

Micah sniffled

"What's up, boy?" The gipsy was gentle with him this morning Micah sat on the bank and shivered He would not enter the water His father swam up to him, grasped a willow root and let the current break in a wave over his back

"Say, boy, what's the matter?"

Micah's face puckered, angry and fearful

"That Johnny Onions," he stammered

"What's wrong with him?" the gipsy asked

"He's going to steal Mam," Micah burst out

The gipsy laughed contemptuously "What for would he steal *her*?"

Micah was stung by his laughter "He took her away last night," he said, his voice envenomed

"Where to?" the gipsy asked

"Into the meadow," the boy replied, frightened by his father's wild face. It was terribly ugly and cruel, and smiling, and his eyes all set. The water bubbled against his side and broke over his skin in a little rush of white foam.

"Don't say nothing to mam," the gipsy said. The tears were trickling down Micah's cheeks and dropping onto his belly and his thighs. The gipsy caught him by the ankle and jerked him into the water.

After breakfast the Breton put the strings of onions on each end of his pole, shouldered it, and stood up to take his leave.

"I remind me always of your goodness," he said, in his rich, curling voice, and added a few words of patois.

The gipsy got up lazily. "I'll come with you a bit," he said. "I'm going to town to get her ear rings out of pawn. Come with me?"

"Volontiers," the Breton said, clapping the gipsy's shoulder.

"Let's get some money from the bed first," the gipsy said.

He entered the caravan. His wife went to the Breton and stood in front of him, very near, rocking a little on her feet.

"You *must* come back," she said. She was nearly out of her body with longing. The Breton moved back.

"I must go selling to get money," he said. "I must get money for my own wife."

"Wife?" she gasped.

He nodded. "I have three children."

She blanched, and then her desire surged back.

"You must come back," she said, her eyes burning in her.

"Come on, Johnny," the gipsy called, "no time to talk."

"Tou' suite," the Breton answered. "Good-bye, missus, thank you." He turned away and walked through the copse with the gipsy. She could hear the twigs cracking under their feet long

after they had gone from sight, and then there was an empty silence. She stood frozen. The tears welled up, turning her desolation to chaos. The day blurred in her sight.

Micah tugged at her skirt. "He's gone, Mam, he's gone," the boy's voice was jubilant. "We'll play all the morning, Mam, is it?"

She could not stand it any longer. All the dead morning, all the parched afternoon, this tearing ache in her lungs, in her bowels. When her husband returned he would be bound to notice it. If she could be calm for a minute, perhaps she might muzzle her passion, drive it back to its lair. She must have respite from the aching for his hands, for the down on his arms, for the fire of his body and the swooning intimacy of his eyes. She had never burned like this before. Oh God! and the silly cows tugging at the grasses and 'heaving, chewing. And the standing trees all round. The life in her leaped in a frenzy to be mingled again with the other life. She stood up and walked dizzily along the path through the beeches. Micah was playing in the stream. He saw her go and ran after her, frightened. She turned on him. "Go back," she flared, "go back. Tell your father I've gone to Cardigan."

Micah stood still. Her face wasn't like his mother's. It had no kindness. He watched her go between the trees. When he realised he was alone, he was afraid to move. He stood there, between the beeches, trembling, for a long time. Then he turned, his eyes blurred with tears, and ran in terror to the caravan, up the steps and into bed. He pulled the quilt over his head and lay in the hollow her body had made. In the dark he unlaced his boots and pushed them over the side of the bed. He pulled her pillow down beside him and stopped weeping.

He woke with a start. His father was bending over him,

holding a candle unsteadily in his hand. A fleck of hot grease fell on his body and he cried aloud.

"Where's she gone?" the gipsy hiccoughed. His breath was sweet, his face haggard. Micah was glad to see him—glad, yet frightened.

"To Cardigan," he said.

"Cardigan?" the gipsy laughed, rolling his head and laughing till his voice cracked and he fell into a choking cough. "Cardigan?" he began laughing again, spittle running from his mouth. Micah huddled in the corner by the wall, the quilt drawn up to his chin. The gipsy began singing drunkenly, waving the candle.

"The King of Spain's daughter

Came to visit me,

But I was as dead as dead could be."

"But it's a long way to Cardigan for a lady." He uncorked a bottle of whisky. "Just a drop to keep my spirits up till she's back."

He took a long swig. The blood came into his face with the heat of it and fled again. It seemed to sober him. He sat heavily on the bed. They sat in silence, the two of them, for hours. The night grew threadbare and grey, the pale gaunt day came lapping in through the open door. The table, the two chairs and the cupboard turned from pitch black pools to sharp silhouettes, as the darkness thinned, they took body and colour. The candle stump guttered to a feeble, sulphurous yellow and spluttered out. And both of them sat waiting, saying nothing.

She knew every turn of the road to Cardigan. They worked that way often in the caravan, before her fly-away marriage. Her father had driven her in every week to shop and market.

So she walked without looking at the road, in a great, haste She walked for hours along the dusty white lanes, only when the sun dazzled her eyes did she realise that it was near sunset She looked about her There were fifteen odd miles between her and Cardigan She could never do it without a rest Her feet were sore and her legs like wet clay She sat in the dusty hedge and idly fingered a tangle of campion and speedwell Her stomach was empty and weak and the gnats gave her no rest She got up, wearily brushing them off her face and neck, and began walking again Fifteen miles it wasn't much use And no money for food In any case he might not be there for two days What would she live on till then? And when he did come, what then? He had no money, and he had had his fill of her She was like a common whore, a madhatter, looking for a man who didn't want her She took her shoes off and bathed her swollen feet in a little brook The water prattled like ice over her toes She moved them up and down and her body sighed with relief She took a handful of cress, broke off the roots, washed it and put it in her mouth It was cool on her tongue, and yet it burnt her like a remorse Ever since she had seen the gipsy come out of the cowshed, dusting his knees, she had been helpless in the whirlpool of her mind and body She saw it clearly, looking down upon herself She must go back to the caravan If he had stayed in town overnight, he would never know And Micah there alone—God! She pulled her sandals on, fingers trembling with haste, and started back along the lane, walking swiftly with a new energy The night swirled round her, dew-wet, and a stripling moon moved with her Once she stopped for weariness, slept in the hedge for a little, woke with a start, and went on Then the road turned from grey to ghostly white and the river gathered

the first liquid radiance between its banks She stripped and slipped into the cold, gleaming water If he was back, it would be well to have her wits about her She dressed again, tied her dripping hair, and crossed the last few fields to the caravan It was very still How she hoped he had not returned! She climbed softly up the steps She would slip into bed beside Micah She screamed

He stood up, confronting her, his arm upraised He was chalk-white and unkempt and his eyes were black He rocked a little on his feet and a filthy grin grew slowly on his face "You—whore," he grunted

She saw the bottle clenched in his uplifted hand and she laughed

"Whore!" she said shrilly, "you're a fine one to call me whore You creeping swine Didn't I see you crawl out of the cowshed with that farm girl yesterday? You—my—*husband*!"

She wasn't frightened now She was mad with him He had taken a woman after refusing her If he was going to fight, she was strong, too

"I'll kill you," he screamed She leaped at him The bottle splintered against the wall and they rolled over, fighting like cats She was strong, stronger than she had ever been, and his fists did not hurt her Micah climbed across the bed and ran in terror through the door He paused in the meadow He could hear them scuffling and grunting inside He ran into the wood, out of earshot

He pummelled her until his arms ached but she clung to him, her hands locked round his neck, her ankles clasped behind his knees He was breathless, and suddenly, with a grunt, the fury left him and he relaxed She lay taut on his body for a minute, then slowly loosed him and lifted herself up on her

elbows His eyes were shut, his cheeks sunken. He had taken another woman Well, *she* was mistress of him now And she brushed his curly hair back from his forehead and wiped the sweat from his face He opened his eyes and saw her face close behind him

"You are back, then?"—his voice sounded strangely young

"Yes," she said, "yes Do you want me?"

He took her head in his hands and drew her down to him.

"I always wanted you" He closed his eyes again "I can't understand what happened ——"

She covered his mouth with her hand

"Never mind," she whispered, "never mind about that Let's lie on the bed It's alright now"

The gypsy pulled a paper envelope from his pocket, took her cupped hand and poured the ear rings into it She bent naked before the mirror, screwing them into the lobes of her ears and brushing her black hair back

After an hour lying in the deepest part of the wood, Micah came back slowly and fearfully to the clearing Slowly he tiptoed up the steps of the caravan, apprehensive of the silence, and found them lying together under the red blanket, face to face and fast asleep

The child did not wake them Instead he sat quietly on the steps and carved a whistle out of a sycamore branch, knowing that when they woke everything would be the way he liked it

PICNIC

THERE were three of them sitting in the shelter of the sand dune Auntie Flora with her thin hooked nose, her eyebrows that met in the middle like the drawing of a black gull and her gimlet eyes that bored into you when she asked you "personal" questions or told you that *somebody* had forgotten to pull the lavatory chain Uncle Hubert, with his enormous tummy that looked as though a sack of barley had been propped between his bandy little legs And Marion, with the broad forehead and narrow shoulders of an early Flemish madonna, eating too many sandwiches because the silence embarrassed her

"There's sand everywhere," fussed Auntie Flora, glaring accusingly at Marion, "you must have had sandy fingers when you buttered the bread

Marion looked down and saw Auntie Flora wipe her false teeth in the hem of her voile frock as though they were a pair of spectacles Prudently she turned to watch the sea, the flat, grey, monotonous sea.

Uncle Hubert coughed, sighed, breathed deeply and said "Bout time our Leonard got here"

"Stop fussing about Len, for goodness sake," snapped Auntie Flora "I dare say his boss needed him, or that precious Norah of his kept him waiting If I had *half* our Leonard's gifts I wouldn't wait for any girl, I know"

Uncle Hubert wiped his perspiring hands in his indecently tight trousers and groaned as he tried to straighten his back.

"Why don't you go for a walk, Hubert," Auntie Flora snapped, "instead of wriggling like a worm Take Marion for a paddle"

Uncle Hubert filled his pipe before replying

"Walk?" he said ponderously, and lit a match "What? In these boots? On this sand?" He cleared his throat "I don't know why we came here in the first place Oh damn!" The match burnt his finger and thumb and he thrust them straight into his round, fat mouth

"Give it here"—Auntie Flora was exasperated—"You ought to know better than to play about with lighted matches Here's some butter" Her false teeth clicked in vexation as she rubbed an opened sandwich against the burnt skin

"I can't see *anything* there," she said

Marion was so relieved to think that Uncle Hubert had forgotten about the paddle that she took another sandwich from the newspaper-cloth and thereby exposed a Harrods' dance frock advertisement Quite suddenly she "saw" Auntie Flora trying to struggle into the frock, and the sandwich went down the wrong way

Auntie Flora slapped her back "Eat slowly, for goodness sake," she said

And then Leonard yelled out from the top of the sand dune

"Hallo, all of you," he shouted "Mind us butting in?"

"Len!" cried Auntie Flora "Mind? Oh ho, you *are* a one! Mind? I should think not"

And Len, large as life in his new gaberdine grey bags and oxblood sports jacket, came sliding down the sandy slope, gripping Norah by the elbow Auntie Flora's shining face wore

her special smile, like a smear of margarine

They all stood up and shook hands. Marion was too embarrassed either to see or hear. But when they all sat down again round the greasy paper cloth, the awkwardness and the heat ebbed slowly back and she looked up at Norah. Their eyes met and intuitively they smiled at each other. She hadn't expected Norah to be like that.

Auntie Flora began saying how charming the beach was, and Marion stopped listening. She scooped up a handful of dry sand and watched it pour through a crack in her cupped hands and form a tiny, fluid pyramid. God made the mountains like that.

She had heard Leonard tell Auntie Flora "all about" Norah—that she was at college and had met him at tennis and was a jolly good sport. And Marion was puzzled and distressed. What *could* Norah see in a blusterer like Leonard? And then Auntie Flora's words broke through her stockade of thoughts. Her body dissolved in the outflow of her shame. "Of course Marion is only with us for a week or two," Auntie Flora was saying. "She had a thin time lately"—the usual suggestive pause—"and we felt we'd like to help a little—you always *feel* for people in trouble, somehow, don't you?"

Marion lifted her flushed and naked face and looked straight into Norah's eyes. Norah knew that Daddy was in jail alright—Leonard was so confiding—and her grey eyes were full of understanding, her smile of healing.

"Ah well," Leonard sighed sententiously, "it's no use crying over spilt milk. Let's go and skim stones, Marion, shall we?"

Marion watched her toe scrape a furrow in the sand, a sandhopper struggled against the landslide.

"Sulky," Leonard mocked.

„Come on, Marion,” Norah whispered, touching her bowed head.

Marion climbed to her feet and began walking towards the sea.

“Off with you, Len,” Auntie Flora directed, “Norah’ll stay and tidy up with me I *despise* leaving refuse, Norah, don’t you?”

“You’re not expecting me to leave Norah behind, mum, are you?” Leonard asked indignantly.

“Go on then,” Auntie Flora melted into a beetroot colour, “the three of you And take Dad with you.”

“Pity to wake him,” Leonard said

When they reached the sea Marion and Norah wandered off and began picking shells, storing them in the skirt of Marion’s frock, which she lifted up by the hem like a little hammock She made tiny sounds of delight over the delicate whorled, subtly coloured shells They were so *strange* Quite different, somehow, from people or toys New, a new, new thing, a whole new life And she looked at the sea heaving, and the passionate green waves of curving glass Oh! She danced light-footed into the water and the green turned white round her bare ankles The shells laughed together in her rumpled skirt and she turned to look at Norah, laughing with joy

Leonard was there, with his arm round Norah’s shoulder

“Watch that wave,” he shouted But the wave broke over her shoulder He burst out laughing

As they walked back across the beach Norah smoothed Marion’s tousled hair.

“When do you return home, Marion?” she asked

“Tuesday,” Leonard said, when Marion did not reply. And

then Marion shook the shells out of her lap, in a cascade over her bare, spindly legs.

"Don't you want to keep the shells?" Norah asked softly.

Marion shook her head mutely and would not look up

"Come on, Norah," Leonard said "She's sulking again
Let's run"

He grabbed Norah's hand and made her run with him

And Marion followed behind, pale and shivering, though
not with cold

THE LAPSE

AT 4.13 Henry showed his season ticket to the porter and climbed into the railway car. He nodded politely to Miss Burge, the teacher at the kindergarten, who sat in her corner seat knitting the green jumper she had started last month, and to the district nurse in her black pork-pie hat, her professional bag tucked warmly against her stomach. They both smiled back—nothing said, never anything said—and he went to his usual place at the far end of the car. He filled his pipe while waiting for the train to start, and then put it back into his pocket.

Back and fore, back and fore, like a shuttle, workwards each morning, homewards each night, ra-ta-ta, ra-ta-ta, the train's travelling beat—how many times have I done this journey, these last five years? If I put the journeys end to end it would stretch a long way—right into Tibet perhaps, along the Turk-Sib, among the moujiks. Oh dear! Henry yawned and gazed indifferently at the row of slatternly back gardens and flapping clothes lines past which the train ran. Twice a day for five years, Bank holidays excepted, those drab hotchpotch backs where the wives riddled yesterday's ashes and the children sat on the steps eating bread and jam. It was so depressing to see those streets every day, always the same, and the people always the same—how many of them knew they had been condemned to serve a life?

And then, with a rattle and a wrench, the open country, the

hills swooping like swallows Below the embankment the black river swirled, wandering down from the coal mines at the head of the valley And the train rattled over the bridge that spanned the river, Henry felt the drop under the bridge, sheer and empty in the pit of his stomach, like a bird flashing through a hollow cave And on, *accelerando*, through the cutting What shall I do to-night, the tired voice asked in his head Pictures? Or a nap and a stroll down to the billiard hall? I don't know what to do, I can never make up my mind I know what'll happen—I'll stand by my bedroom window looking down into the empty street And in the end I won't go out I'll waste the night, as usual, as I waste everything I ought to decide to *do* something, to get *on* One day I *will* do something, to justify all this waste, something grand, careless . . . I *must* .

I wonder what's for dinner this evening Mother will have it all ready, whatever it is, warmed up and waiting, and she'll sit opposite me while I eat it, watching me wolf it, and at the end she'll have a cup of tea with me Doctor said she's alright But often I dream she is dead, and I wake up sweating

Halt number one The schoolgirl comes in and sits where she always sits, and takes a book out of her satchel, a different book this week She has grown a lot in the last five years She used to be a scrimpy, flat-chested little thing, her head always poked out of the window, now she sits absorbed in her book and there is a difference about everything she does She must be about sixteen, she hardly looks it, with her mouse-bitten fringe and her black stockings She's got a strange face, those who don't know her would never call it pretty They'd only see her prominent top teeth, her weak chin, her flat cheekbones They'd miss the secret quality, the look she has when she turns from her book to look out through the window

She's pulling on her woollen gloves, she gets out at the next halt I wish I knew where she lives—in the semi-detached red-roofed houses on the right, or the huddle of slums on the left? Not that it matters really, the train always starts off before she's left the platform. Sometimes, if she hasn't finished her chapter before the train stops, she walks along the platform with her book open.

The little woman who only travels on Thursdays is snoring; she always puts her feet up and snoozes. Her head hangs forward, her oak-apple nose nearly dropping into her shopping basket, her pink umbrella laid across her lap. Her shoes need soling. Oh, curse it and curse it. It's always, always the same, daunting you properly. Makes you want to smash the window, pull the communication cord, scream. And instead you swallow the scream, you can hear it struggling inside you, battering at the door of your throat. And you sit still, and look at the old lady's brown hat, and Miss Burge knitting, and *her* reading. It's been lovely, really, watching her grow up, wondering about her, her name and what she thinks when she's reading and what Life will do to her, and feeling sorry for her, somehow.

The train stopped with a shudder that rattled all the windows. The red roofs and the biscuit facades of the new houses waited faithfully outside. The girl closed her book and obediently went out.

And then, all of a sudden, Henry got up and walked down the car, past Miss Burge and the district nurse, who stared at him in astonishment. The blood was beating like a steel hammer behind his eyes. He fumbled and tugged at the carriage door. But he got out, and was standing on the ash platform, for the first time, ever. She was a few yards ahead of him,

finishing her chapter, walking slowly, unaware. He stepped forward. The porter shouted "OK" to the guard. The engine-driver leaned over the footplate. Henry stood stock still, looking at the girl, at the railings, at the yellow advertisement of Duck, Son and Pinker's pianos. The guard shouted "What are you getting off here for?" The green flag and the engine's hoot. Henry scrambled back into the carriage, the guard shouted at him and a porter blasphemed. He shut the door with quivering hands and slouched back to his seat. Miss Burge and the nurse stared at him and at each other. He didn't notice anything. He just slumped into his seat and clenched his hands, squeezing them between his knees. After a couple of minutes he blew his nose hard and rubbed some smuts out of his eyes. The train crashed into the black mouth of the tunnel with a shriek. It woke the old lady. She opened her eyes and tidied her collar, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to open one's eyes, after they have been closed.

The train came out of the tunnel and stopped. The old lady picked up her basket and her pink umbrella, Miss Burge rolled up her knitting, the nurse fingered the silver hatpin that skewered her porkpie hat. Henry followed them out onto the platform and slunk past the guard like a criminal.

INTERRUPTION

THE railway bridge was a good place from which to see You could see the holes in the roofs where a winter wind blew away a slate or two You could see the chimneys where the shiny starlings lived, where they croaked and preened Or the back gardens—cabbage run to seed, ashes and flimsy fences of stolen pit timber and iron bedsteads—or the lavatories at the bottom of the gardens But of course the real thing you could see was the railway line, passing right underneath the bridge, whew, right underneath When the train came swinging out of the station, and raced towards the bridge, getting bigger and bigger, louder and fiercer and faster, whew, that was the time for you to be on the bridge

"You're afraid to open your legs when the train comes, you are," said Dickie

When Annie Mayhew didn't answer back he said it again, prodding her this time with his toe—the toe that stuck out of his toecap, his big toe

"Oh, get off it and stop your messing," Annie said in a pet She was squatting on her heels laying the table

"Playing house" Dickie scoffed "Pansy girl, paint your face next, won't play cowboys You're *afraid* to open your legs" Yes, he was quite furious.

Annie picked up a stone from the house

"I'll lamm you if you don't leave me be," she said viciously.

"You know we been told to keep quiet to-day, till they've gone I don't want a hiding when I get home even if you do"

"Pansy," muttered Dickie, cowed. "Wait till the next train comes We'll see" He glowered darkly through the fencing at the empty line.

"I won't be long," he said, threateningly

Then little Gwennie came up to the bridge, crying and snuffling and scratching her bottom She had red hair and a patched blue coat pinned round her throat by a safety pin and her delicate face was dirty and stained with tears

"Come on into the kitchen, Gwen," Annie said motheringly "Been stung again?"

"No," Gwennie replied miserably hugging her trouble and staying outside the front door

"What is it, my dear?" said Annie, stepping over the front wall with the careful grace of a princess of Brobdiagnag paying a state call on the duchess of Lilliput

"Our Johnnie've gone up the mountain," Gwennie sobbed

"Well, whassa matter, gal? 'E'll come down again when 'e's 'ungry?" Annie reassured her

"'E won't," said Gwennie obstinately, beginning to cry again "There's a stone up the mountain"

"'E'll climb over it, Johnnie will," Annie said with conviction

Gwennie hesitated doubtfully, then stepped into the house

"Is it washing day today?" she asked

"Shift your old house, Annie Mayhew," Dickie said peremptorily "They're coming now The wheels will go over your house"

Annie looked down the road.

"Ooh!" she exclaimed, breathless with rapture. "Look, Gwen-

nie, it's the coffin Ooh, and all them white flowers And the glass " She couldn't take her eyes off the little row of taxis and and the gleaming hearse and the dark-suited bunch of men outside the dilapidated house

"Ooh, there's lovely," Annie breathed, gazing and gazing "Is it heavy, Dickie, for all them men to be carrying it?"

"Course it is," Dickie said scornfully "You try and lift it"

„She didn't look heavy," Annie said thoughtfully, "she was in white and her hands folded, and white ribbons, she didn't look heavy "

"Shift your house out the way," Dickie insisted

She cupped her tattered pinafore up and put the stones of the house into it Dickie put a few into his jersey Then they stood up The hearse had started up the road towards the bridge

"Come by here, Gwennie," Annie said suddenly, taking the child fiercely by the hand They stood against the railings watching the hearse approach and the double row of mourners

"I seen a dead rat, too," Annie said, mostly to herself

And then, while they stood awed and silent, they heard a train rattle out of the station They could see the white smoke, and then the train itself, very tiny, and then it grew bigger, swiftly, swiftly Dickie shuffled his feet, gauged the distance of the black crawling procession, shuffled his feet and frowned Then he said

"Come on, you baby. Come on by the railings Open your legs, you baby" Before Annie could stop him he had dragged her by the skirt across the road They were standing over the rail, looking down at the monstrous burnished engine, the screaming steam, the mad mechanical stampede, and she couldn't move her limbs or her tongue She was petrified, rooted, like

those nightmares when you're being eaten by wolves and you can't shout or anything The train shrieked a warning

"Open your legs," Dickie shouted, deliriously

She obeyed, and the train rushed through, whew, through her very legs, sucking her entrails out, emptying her, terribly Her mouth was wide open but no sound came Her lips quivered and her face was dead white

The hearse went slowly past

Even when the procession had gone out of sight she still stood shivering against the railings Little Gwennie, crying again, tugged her skirt

"Let's build the house again, Annie, is it?" she said

"You're frightened," Dickie taunted, sticking his face in front of her's and then whooping off down the road, clicking his tongue like a broncho buster

"What was in that box?" Gwennie said thoughtfully, "under them flowers?"

Between scorn and pity Annie gazed at the untidy red hair and the big soft eyes inarticulately

"Why," she said, "don't you *know*?"

And then her eyes filled with tears, like Gwennie's But not because of the train Dickie could say what he liked She wasn't crying because of the train She'd shown him about *that* alright

"Come on, Gwennie," she said thickly "My mother said to bring you home to *our* house for tea to-day"

Clinging to Annie's skirt, skipping with delight, Gwennie went out to tea

THE HOUSEKEEPER

MERVYN walked sulkily into the kitchen, hanging his head and kicking the toe of his shoe against the passage skirting

"Granny won't let me go out through the front door, Mam," he grombled

Myfanwy put down the floorcloth and straightened her back. She was kneeling on a piece of sacking and washing the kitchen floor. All the chairs were piled on the oilcloth table and the rag mat rolled back to the fender.

"Never mind, bach," she said "Go out the back way instead."

"But I *want* to go out the front," he wailed, tears brimming into his eyes, "and she won't let me. She's put her chair right in the doorway and she said not to bother her."

"She's waiting for dad to come back," Myfanwy said.

"She wants to see him coming up the street."

"Well, has she *got* to sit in the doorway for that? Oh Mam,"—vexation made the child almost inarticulate—"why does she live with us?"

"Because she's your daddy's mother, that's why," Myfanwy said. "Now go on out the back like a good boy, and play with Jackie."

"Jackie won't play, he's reading," Mervyn pouted. And then, seeing that his mother had said her last word and was wringing the floorcloth in the bucket of black water, he trailed his feet towards the back door.

"I hope she dies," he muttered, "I hope she dies"

"He's coming," Granny croaked in her ancient, broken voice Myfanwy heard her mumbling excitedly to herself A minute later she heard Penry's hacking cough outside the front door

"Did you get the money alright?" Granny quavered

"'Course I did, Mam," Penry answered "They always pay the dole, gal, on the dot"

"And my pension? My five shillings?" the old woman pursued

"Aye, and your five bob," he laughed

"Let me see it, then," she said thirstily

"Wait till I get into the kitchen, then," he said, good-humouredly "You don't want everybody to know how rich we are, do you?"

"Alright then," Granny picked up her stick and pressing the end of it against the doorkerb tried to push herself onto her feet

"Up you get," he said, putting his hands under her armpits "you're nothing but an old bag of bones, Mam"

"Never mind about that," she replied, breathlessly "I'll live longer thans you now, my boy—the way she's feeding you"

"Haven't you finished scrubbing yet?" he asked, entering the kitchen and pushing his cloth cap onto the back of his head

"Not yet," Myfanwy replied She did not look up

"You're getting house-proud, that's what's the matter with you," he said

She dropped the floorcloth into the pail and stood up Her auburn hair had escaped from the ribbon with which she had

pulled it back from her forehead, and fell in clusters over her face. She tossed it back with a shake of her head and tucked her stained calico blouse inside the waistband of her skirt. Her breasts pressed against the thin wet blouse, her face was flushed with bending, her hands puffed and red with immersion in the scrubbing water.

"Is a beggar of his rags?" she said, rocking on the balls of her feet and smiling in a way he didn't understand.

"Where's my pension?" Granny nagged. Spittle trickled down the tunnels of withered skin at the corners of her sagged and toothless mouth. Myfanwy picked up the hem of her apron and wiped it off.

"Makes your mouth water, does it?" she said with a laugh.

"Get off me," Granny whined. "Where's my money?"

Penry took a brown envelope out of the back pocket of his frayed and dirty grey trousers, and spilt the contents onto the table. A bright silver shilling rolled between the chair legs.

"There it is," he said. "Five shillings for you, Mam, twenty-six for Myfanwy and me, three for Jackie and two for Mervyn."

Granny's brown skinny talons closed over her portion.

"What are you doing?" Penry said. "Leave it be, gal."

"I'm going to keep it myself from now on," Granny said. She held the money against her flannel blouse, pressing it to her withered bosom.

"Well, you'll have to go and live somewhere else then," Myfanwy said, indifferently.

"No, I won't," Granny screamed. "I'm staying here, see? You've been taking my five shillings regular this last seven years, and making on me every week. I don't cost you five shillings the way you feed me, I know."

"Cool down a bit, Mam," Penry interposed, putting his hand

on her shoulder. "You'll be having a stroke if you don't watch"

"I don't care," Granny shouted, her old face working and twitching, wet with tears and saliva, "I don't care. It's time somebody told her, she've robbed us all long enough Tell the police, I would"

Myfanwy laughed, her face was wild with scorn and anger She untied her apron strings and pulled the soaking apron over her head

"Well, manage for yourselves, then," she said "I'm going"

She was just pulling her coat on when Mervyn came running in from the back, whooping like a redskin He nearly knocked Granny over as he leaped to his mother and tugged at her skirt

"There's fox and 'ounds on the mountain, Mam, " he said, jumping up and down with excitement "Can me and Jackie go and follow them?"

She ran her fingers through his hair

"You *are* a dirty little thing," she said softly "What have you been doing?" She wiped his running nose and tidied his red jersey.

"Digging for treasure," he said "Can we follow the fox and 'ounds?"

"I'll take you up, now," Penry said "I've got to go up to the allotment with the sow's food Gi'me five minutes, that's all"

Jackie saw the money on the table

"Ad dole, dad, is it?" He gazed at the bright pile of silver and copper, "Can I 'ave a 'a penny this week?"

Myfanwy picked two pennies up

"You can have two this week," she said, "and give the other

penny to Jackie, will you?"

"Oooh!" Mervyn was speechless

"Now don't go spending it all," she said "You've got to put some of it by for the Sunday school trip in the summer, mind"

"I'll only spend a 'a'penny," he said solemnly, and then shot out of the door, yelling the news to his brother

Myfanwy took off her coat

"There's hot water for the pig's food in the kettle," she said "We're nearly out of coal, too"

"I'll go up the tip to-morrow all day," he said "I can't leave the sow to-day, though I think she'll be dropping to-day She was lying on her side groaning this morning, before I went up for the dole, and swollen up so—he's bound to farrow before to-morrow"

He fetched a bucket full of potato peel from the back yard and tipped it into a round iron boiler While he busied himself Granny quietly put the five shilling back on the table She pulled her woollen shawl close round her scraggy neck and shuffled back to her chair by the front door

Myfanwy watched her husband stir the boiler He sat hunched over the fire, his eyes following the circling swirl of the brown liquid As he stirred a warm dirty smell came from the boiler Myfanwy shuddered

"Well, why don't you say anything?" she asked

"About what?" he said dully, avoiding her challenge

"About the way she carries on," she said "She pinches the children and tells them lies about me She's always trying to turn you against me, and if I argue with her ever she starts snivelling and tells me I'm taking advantage of her being a widow I'm not going to stand it"

She was crying quietly Penry kept on stirring the boiler

"She can't help it," he said sullenly "She's old"

"And I'm young," Myfanwy said "Can't you see that? I'm not wasted yet But I will be before long She's sucking my blood And it's bad blood, bad blood, all the time And you don't think about it You don't worry as long as you've got your allotment and the sow drops regular ——"

"Don't carry on like this," he said, putting the boiler on the hearth and standing up slowly All his actions were slow and careful, like his face, slowly losing its youth and settling down easily into middle age "It's no use creating, you ought to know that by this time"

"Yes," she said, turning pale with the effort to stay her feelings, "I know it's no use I wish to God I was dead"

He pulled his old working coat down from the hook in the passage It had been boiled and worn until it was threadbare, but the blotches of oil and wagon grease that covered it kept the tattered cloth whole

"Well, I got to go and see that sow," he said "I may be up there all night—depends on how easily she farrows"

He hitched a Davy lamp to his coat pocket and picked up the boiler of bubbling pigs' wash

"I'll bring your tea up if you don't come down before," she said

"Solong, Myfanwy," he said

As he passed her she looked into his eyes He wasn't the weeping sort, but there was a wounded, helpless look in them, and she knew it had been bad for him, too

"Go on," she said "Go and coddle your old sow"

When he had gone she finished tidying the kitchen, dusting

the shiny black rexine of the chair seats and pushing the woollen stuffing back into the rips. When she had finished she looked at the room. It winked all over—the brass studs fastening the oilcloth to the table, the varnished legs of the chairs, the brassoed fender, the smooth knob of the poker. She breathed in deeply and smiled, then took a comb down from the mantelpiece and combed her hair back. She cleaned the comb when she had finished and threw the loose hairs onto the fire.

"Kitchen's ready, Granny," she shouted.

And as the old woman hobbled along the passage, she went out through the back door to play with the children.

The back garden was about four yards wide, and as the house was built against the side of the hill, the garden sloped up steeply to the shed at the top. It was fenced off from the gardens of the next door houses by a hotch-potch barrier of old zinc sheeting, rusted iron bedsteads, and tin advertisements of Colman's Mustard and Brooke Bond's Tea. There was no door to the shed, and the tarred felting which covered the thin wooden front hung over in flapping folds, like the crippled wing of a black vulture. The garden itself was a patch of rubble and ash, holding nothing but a few rows of rotting beansticks, a line of seed cabbage with knobbly whitening stems, a couple of purple pickling cabbage, and three bare currant bushes. Next door up had a line of washing out—long workman's pants pegged up by the legs, the wind blowing through the holes where the darning had given way, a pair of patched sheets, three tiny frayed vests—flapping and beating in the gusty weather. Mervyn had climbed over the iron bedstead into next door and was standing alertly under the long prop which kept the clothes' line in the air.

"Come on back this minute," Myfanwy shouted. "You'll get

your bottom tanned if Mrs Williams finds you in her back "

"I'm playing ship," Mervyn remonstrated "We'll 'ave to reef our sails if this wind don't go down."

"You come on back," she insisted, smiling inwardly

Jackie was sitting in the shed, on the block Penry used for chopping sticks

"You'll cetch cold sitting in the dark like that," she said "Come on into the sun "

"A'right," Jackie answered "I only got two pages to finish the chapter"

He did not lift his head from the book he was reading She looked over his shoulder—*David Copperfield* It looked a long book, it was wonderfull how he read such long books, such a slip of a kid She didn't know what to think about Jackie He was doing well in County School—fourth in the form last terminal and the Headmaster said on his report "Very promising" But it was five years before he could go to college, and then another few before he'd be qualified for a job And all that time he'd have to be kept Her soul seemed to wilt inside her and tear in two in the darkness like an outworn garment when she thought of all those years ahead It made her dizzy And his legs were so thin, his knees little bony lumps like the stalks of the seed cabbage, and his shoulders hunched over his books in the evenings were frightening to look at, skinny little collarbone and protruding blades And when he put his books away at bed time, and looked up short-sightedly and sleepily, his pretty brown eyes with a bluish pallor glowing through the skin underneath them melted all her heart You just couldn't tell what would come to him—whether he'd win loose from here and live, really live, somewhere else away from it all, or whether it was asking too much of his little body

You just couldn't tell Penry said he ought to come out of school and work in the allotment for a bit, it would do him more good

And then Mervyn, podgy little savage, crept softly behind Jackie and shoved him off the block with a blood-curdling whoop.

"Come on," he said, imperiously "Let's go and spend"

"Tell him to stop it, Mam," Jackie said quietly "He's always messing"

"Never mind," she said softly, smoothing his hair and straightening his black and amber school tie "Go on with him to Granny Geake's and buy some loshins"

"Oh alright," Jackie said, with querulous resignation "Come on, messer" He stuffed his book under his jersey, caught Mervyn by the hand and led him down the path to the back door

.

The garden was so barren and lonely when they had gone Myfanwy stood in the shed, in the semi-darkness, suddenly trembling She didn't know what to do with herself for the rest of the afternoon She stood there for a long time, and the feeling got worse, making all her limbs weak and shaky, her knees had no strength and her heart pounded like an hysterical limed bird She sat down on the block, and her thoughts went down from her like roots And then, with a terrible effort, she thrust the black wave back and walked slowly down the path and out into the back lane

It was better in the back lane The high dry stone walls of the allotments which enclosed the lane on the other side gave her a solid reassurance, she tossed her head back and told herself she was being silly She wondered whether the children

were giving Granny Geake any trouble They could never decide what to buy They climbed onto the footstool in the old woman's parlour in order to see over the counter, and then asked her innumerable questions She remembered buying at Granny Geake's herself The smelly little parlour with its oil-cloth counter ranged with great paradisaical glass bottles, smooth and round and filled with coloured sweets, and the thrilling moment when Granny took the thick glass lid off and plunged her hands into the bottle, sifting the sweets like diamonds, and then at the last moment changing your mind and deciding instead to buy a bag of sherbet or a barley stick or a Turkish Delight, whereupon Granny replaced the lid with a vexatious click of her tongue, and shuffled across the parlour in her carpet slippers to get some coppers out of her little tin box She had a big white wen on her neck that fascinated the children, and behind her silver-rimmed spectacles her eyes hid in her pouched and wrinkled flesh She had been like that when Myfanwy went there to spend, nothing was changed in Granny Geake's, neither the delight of the sweets nor the fascination of the wen, when she thought of the children Myfanwy thought of her own childhood, nothing had changed She hoped Jackie would not forget to offer Granny a loshin, there was no danger of her taking one, her withered old gums would have bruised themselves on a boiled sweet, but she liked to be offered one, and she gave you better measure for it

She was glad she had the children, although she knew it would be better for them if they hadn't been born She hadn't intended having any, before their marriage she had told Penry that she wouldn't have any until he got a job somewhere—Slough or Dagenham or anywhere—but Jackie was already forming inside her when she said it, and their marriage had

to be hurried up And now the children were repeating her own first days It was like being caught in a winding belt in the colliery, going round and round, never getting loose .

She left the back lane and climbed the wet path up the mountain, following its twisting through the gorse bushes In the big bush by the gate they had found a hedge sparrow's nest last summer—or the summer before—and Jackie had taken one of the eggs, pricking it on a thorn and blowing it out He had taken it to the school museum She parted the stinging green branches to see whether the nest was still there There was a sodden little pile of matted grass and leaves caught on the thorns, no more She looked at it for a minute without moving or thinking, then sighed and went on up the path

From the mountain side she could see the whole village The black and swollen stream running down from the ravine at the head of the valley split the village in two The lower part consisted of three straggling parallel rows of dirty grey houses, built by the Colliery Company in the '80's when the bottom pit was sunk Myfanwy could only see the back gardens—a long row of bare patches, with nothing growing In one of them—five doors up from her own house—a man was chopping sticks He was wearing a pair of blue serge trousers, and a waistcoat buttoned over a collarless Welsh flannel shirt A woman was bending over a pile of baking utensils two doors away She washed the dishes under the tap, soaking her stockings and old blue skirt When she had finished she stood up and watched the man chopping sticks She had flabby shapeless breasts and her hair blew in long rat tails over her spectacles Myfanwy could hear the dull echo of the axe on the chopping

block. She thought, "I wonder what else they could be doing, those two." But looking down on them from above, she saw that they had no choice but to be there, part of the composition of broken-down sheds and barren backs, fulfilling a predestined role.

There must be some way of getting away. An easier way than the one facing Jackie—years of study and borrowing and doing without, poor kid. If they could tear themselves loose, rip the old cloth get away from the rut of pig sties and idle collieries and dreary monotonous days. What sort of a life was this? House work, gossiping over the garden wall, child-bearing, patching and darning, making ends meet, putting a little aside to get the children's shoes tapped before the winter, looking bleakly ahead, narrowly, timidly. Ever since the pit closed down it had gone on changelessly, a gradual decline which the people faced with the self-defensive cheerfulness of consumptives. Penry wouldn't stir himself out of it. He didn't fret and nag like Granny, he hadn't got her wicked turn of mind, no, there was just no fire in him. He'd spend hours carving a wooden boat out of a strip of bark for Mervyn, nothing was too much trouble, he'd help his mates to mend their sheds. But he wouldn't get out. She'd nagged him into a temper time and again, but he wouldn't budge. He had his allotment, his pigs and his chickens, he had his old mother, his wife and children. And he'd always lived there, from the day of his birth. It's hard to leave the place if you've never left it before.

I must stop fretting against it all the time, she told herself. It's no good. I must say, deep inside me, "I accept, I have accepted." I must give myself some peace, let my soul grow solid, so that the children will have something real and durable.

to cling to I have never been a mother to them, when they sucked my milk they sucked at my soul, at my restless fears. I must settle down in my soul

She looked over the block of red-bricked council houses on the other bank of the stream at the derelict rusty overhead haulage of the top pit. It had been idle for six years, the wheel had been dismantled, there was nothing left but the drifting coal dust, which still blew down the valley on gusty days when the wind whipped it off the crest of the tips. Only the dust and the people.

She scoured the back lane with her eyes, trying to spot the children. Then she saw them, crossing the river by the little bridge, and picking their way through the tangled web of rusted lines and disused sidings going further away from her. She watched them pass the front gate of the Vicarage, the tiny red smudge of Mervyn's jersey crawling slowly along by the privet hedge. The Vicar's three monkey trees towered stiffly over him. The red blob moved on until it reached the church, the ugly church with its five side chapels built in a row against the north wall of the nave, like a huge angular sow lying on its side with its dugs flopping on the ground. The children looked like flies, settled on the carcass, probing the flesh, moving a little round the wound. They must be waiting for choir practice.

Well, she must accept the idle pits and the faded window curtains, the inanimate church and the slow denudation. She continued her climb along the hill side, making for Penry's allotment.

She could see him in the distance, shovelling pigs' dung into the soap box which he had fitted onto the axle and wheels of Jackie's tricycle. Then suddenly he hurried through the gate

into the allotment She wondered what had made him move so quickly Perhaps the sow had started to farow She shivered The thought revolted her The fat fertile sow, lying grunting in the mud, dung caked on its fat flanks, fat heaving flanks with distended, oil-filled pores It was more disgusting than the malicious old woman who sat muttering to herself by the kitchen fire And the way Penry tended it, talked about it, saved the week's peelings for it, when he was sitting by the fire in the nights he was wondering to himself how many she would bear next time, and whether it was worth trying another boar with her

As she got nearer the pig sty her disgust mounted so that she tasted in her mouth the fried bread and dripping they had had for dinner The allotment was surround by a huge stone wall, two feet thick When she was small she used to marvel at the thickness of the walls, believing that they must enclose something precious beyond words The men who went inside seemed to her to be demigods, passing in and out of Eden There was still something unreal about the thick walls, and about the white hens strutting outside, pecking viciously at the cabbage stumps that littered the ground, and about the intolerant cockerels with their rusty-red neck feathers and pink scalloped combs Something comic and desultory and feckless

The sty had been built at odd moments, with odd shillings and wood scavenged from the pit top It looked like a little tarred ark, hastily constructed after the deluge had begun, with a drain pipe poking out of the roof instead of a chimney The roof was a sheet of corrugated iron, the walls were covered with tarred felting, the wood at the base had rotted and a thick yellow ordure oozed out, foul-smelling She could hear Penry's boots squelching inside, and the sow breathing in

grunts Swallowing her bile she pushed open the green-rotting gate and picked her way through the mud of the sow's forecourt to the low aperture of the shed

Penry was kneeling in the mud with the lantern at his side
The sow lay prostrate under his hands

"Is it coming alright?" she asked

He did not look up There was a disgusting stink in the little shed, infecting the darkness, making it difficult to breathe She lifted her skirt to her nose and let the air filter through to her nostrils

"They're staying in," he said, "they won't drop"

The sow lay very still, breathing heavily, waiting Then it jerked its trotters, writhing convulsively and squealing, squealing It pressed its snout into the mud in the agony of its labour Myfanwy bit her teeth together and clenched her fists She wasn't going to faint, nor puke The squealing stopped, the fat flanks shuddered involuntarily Penry was making inarticulate sounds, of encouragement and endearment and fear

It went on for a long time, long after it got dark outside the shed Penry never once got up from his knees, and Myfanny stayed watching At last the labour overwhelmed the sow, and her squealing suddenly ended with a choking shudder She died with her litter inside her It was the first time she had seen Penry cry

"You can't do anything to it now," Myfanwy said "Put a sack over it and come down to the house It's perishing cold up here"

He did not move, so she covered the corpse herself, and putting her hands under his armpits, lugged him to his feet His body was limp She couldn't move him

"Come on up, Penry, for God's sake," she said sharply

"Don't be such a woman"

He put his hand on the sow's rump and pushed himself to his feet

"It's the ruin of us, this is," he said dully "We'll never be able to afford another"

"Let's get out of here quick," she said, covering her mouth with her hand and squeezing through the low aperture, bent almost double.

After they had had tea she touched Jackie on the shoulder. He looked up from his book with a hasty irritated toss of his head

"Come to the pitchers with us?" she said

"Pitchers?" Granny snapped "You ought to stay in decent-like, with the sow dead like it is"

"Are you coming, Jackie?" Myfanwy said, ignoring the alert wizened face

"Alright"

Jackie put his book carefully away in the table drawer and took down his coat from the passage hooks. Meanwhile Myfanwy rolled up the sleeves of Mervyn's jersey and scrubbed the dirty water mark off his fat wrists. They had to hurry. Mervyn ran by her side, too preoccupied with the task of keeping pace with her to speak. Jackie took long strides, his hands thrust in his coat pockets, his eyes on the ground.

"You're like an old man to-night, Jack," she said "What are you thinking about?"

She hoped he would laugh, but he just walked on as before.

"Is it a sad book, that *David Copperfield*?" she asked

Still he did not answer. His silence vexed her, making her silent too. Just as they reached the end of the back lane he caught her by the sleeve, hesitatingly

"Mam," he said

"What's the matter?" she asked

He dropped his eyes, tucking his chin into his little woollen scarf

"Granny had her head in the gas oven again this afternoon," he said "She said she'd put me inside if I told you anything "

"Next time you see her," Myfanwy said in a dead voice, "leave her to it It's time she knew her own mind at seventy-five "

"You won't say I told you, Mam, will you?" He was pulling at her sleeve, passionately

"No, I won't say anything," she said

He brushed his head against her side with a warm frightened gesture

"Come on," Mervyn said, "we'll be missing the serial if we don't watch "

The threepenny seats were right in the front, under the screen The big picture was just ending The faces of the characters seemed to stretch for miles, like faces in the convex mirror of a spoon It was grotesque and beastly, and sitting in the dark she felt the nausea of the pigsty coming over her again Miles of cheap fleshy faces The whole audience suddenly roared with laughter, Mervyn jumped out of his seat with merriment ,

"Did you see that man then, Mam?" he said, tugging her sleeve "E fell into the pond"

"Shh," she said, "sit down, there's a good boy There's people behind you wanting to see "

And sitting taut and stiff in the darkness, Mervyn and Jackie on either side of her following the movements on the screen

with devout attention, she had to shut her eyes and bite her lips to keep back the words that surged through the gorge of her throat

"I won't accept," the words beat, "I won't, I won't "

And then the film ended, the bare electric lamps were switched on, and the audience stood up with sweaty ,smiling faces while the pianotrope lunched into the first bars of the national anthem

"Come on, little husband," she said to Jackie "Bed's the place for you It's nearly time for school"

PART THREE

13

ACTING-CAPTAIN

THE detachment was a very small one, a single platoon sent from the battalion to guard the dock gates and perimeter, but they had a bugle Acting Captain Cochrane, the detachment commander, had indentured persistently for one, and after two months nagging on his part, DADOS had grudgingly coughed up a brand new one. It was hanging over old Crocker's bed in the fuggy blacked out Nissen hut in which the administrative stuff were sleeping. There was Crocker, an old soldier who had served in Flanders, Gallipoli, India, and the Far East, he was the cook, Acting Lance-Corporal, C3, and used to it. Next to him Taffy Thomas was snoring, the air had grown slowly thicker and more corrupt with fumes from the stove, last night's fish and chips, cigarettes and beer, and all the coming and going since black-out time on the previous evening, so you couldn't breathe it into your lungs without a snore as it squeezed and scraped past your uvula. The fire was still flickering under a weight of grey ash and cinders in the stove.

For no apparent reason Crocker woke up, groaned, yawned, pushed his dirty blankets off and sat up, vigorously scratching his thin hair. He was wearing his thick winter vest and long pants with brown socks pulled up over the legs so that no part of his flesh was showing except where the heel of his sock was worn through. He listened a moment, to discover

whether it was raining; then, finding it wasn't, he unhooked his bugle from the nail above his head, turned the light on to make sure that the office clock, which he always took to bed with him, indicated 6.30 a.m., put out the light again, shuffled to the door, spat, breathed in, closed his lips inside the mouthpiece of the bugle, and blew reveillé. He found he was blowing in E instead of G, but after faltering an instant, laboured through with it in the same key. It was too dark for anyone to notice, not a streak of grey anywhere.

"Gawd curse the dominoes," he grumbled, shuffling back to his bed. He shook Taffy Thomas hard, relishing the warm sleeping body's resistance.

"Get up, yer Welsh loafer," he shouted in his ear. "You'll 'ave the boss on yer tail if you don't get down there wiv 'is shaving water double quick. Get up. You ain't got yer missus besidejer now."

Taffy didn't get up as philosophically as Crocker. He was still young enough to resent and rebel against things the old cook had long ago ceased thinking about. Most things were a matter of course to Crocker, air raids, sinkings, death were as normal as cutting rashers of bacon in the dark and peeling potatoes in his ramshackle corrugated-iron cooking shed.

However, Taffy got up. He put his hand on his head to feel how hot his hangover was, and then in a fit of irritated energy pulled on his trousers and pullover and searched about for his razor. "Well, we're a day's march nearer home," he said, dipping his shaving brush in the jam-tin of cold water he kept under his bed and lathering his face in the dark.

"You pups are always thinking about leave," Crocker said, fed-up. "D'you know I didn't see my old lady for three and 'alf years in the last bust-up, nor any English girl. Plenty of

dusky ones, of course, and Chinese ones that'd scarcely left school—"

"Yeh, I know," Taffy interrupted "You're a real soljer I know"

"Well, I didn't want to write 'ome every time I found a flea under my arm," Crocker scoffed "I've sat in the mud scratching my arse from one Christmas to the next wivour arsking to see the OC abaht it"

"It wasn't your faulr we didn't lose the war, then," Taffy said, wiping his shaved face in his dirty towel "And if you're moaning about me asking for leave and asking for a transfer, you'd better shut your trap, old soljer, 'cause I'm nor going to sit in this dump doing nothing while my missus freezes in the Anderson and coughs 'er up every time Jerry drops a load on Swansea"

"What you going to do, then?" Crocker taunted "Stop the war?"

"No," Taffy answered hotly "Win the bleeding thing"

"Garn," Crocker laughed jeeringly "Get off and polish the cap'n's Sam Browne Win the war, be damned What was you doing at Dunkirk, if it isn't rude to ask? We never scuttled out of it, we didn't"

"Aw, shut up and get a pail of char ready for the lads," Taffy said "I reckon you'd still be in your little dugour if somebody hadn't told you the war was over"

He slammed the door after him, pulled his cycle from under a ripped tarpaulin, and tucking his bag of cleaning kit under his arm, peddled through the muddy pooled ruts, past the sentry shivering in his greatcoat and flapping groundsheet like a spider swollen by the rain, down the lane past the knife-rest and Dannert wire obstacle that ran from the sidings to the

quay where the Irish packet boat lay moored, and out onto the bleak tarred road that was just beginning to reflect a milde-grey light along its wet surface. The detachment commander was billeted in an empty house on the hill above the harbour. Taffy's first job was to boil him some water for shaving and tea, make a cup of tea with a spoon infuser, shake him respectfully, salute, collect his Sam Browne and yesterday's boots or shoes, and retire to the scullery to clean them up. Then he swept the downstairs rooms, looked round to see whether there were any chocolate biscuits hidden in the trench-coat pocket, threw his sweepings outside for the starlings to swoop and grumble over, and then back upstairs to fold the blankets and sheets, empty the wash basin and jerry, and let the clean air of the ocean revitalise the room. The whole operation was conducted in silence, broken only by odd grunts and monosyllables from the officer and a sort of absent-minded whistling by the private. Taffy knew his man well enough to leave him alone while he pulled himself together, a glance at his reflection in the shaving mirror was enough to inform him as to the patient's condition. He had a young face, but his narrow grey eyes and almost pointed teeth, combined with the thin bony forehead and cheeks, gave him an astringent intolerant sharpness that only wore off after he had warmed up to the day's task. He was a regular officer who had been commissioned a few months before the war began, and because of his martinet appearance and the facility with which he could fly into an abrupt temper he had spent most of the war drilling recruits on the square at the regimental depot. He had got the square in his blood by the end, muddy boots or tarnished buttons, an indifferent salute, the lazy execution of a drill or an order provoked him immediately to a violent reprimand, all his

actions were impatient and smart, his appearance immaculate and important, his opinions unqualified and as definite as they were ill-informed. His nature was bound to insist sooner or later on action, he had got into a bad state at the depot and asked to be posted to a battalion. He considered it a rebuff when he was posted to this small harbour on the featureless north-west coast, and it hadn't improved his frame of mind to consider that a further application for posting would be impolitic while an indefinite stay in his present post could only blur the image of a forceful disciplined soldier which he had so assiduously striven to impress on the depot command. He endured his inactive isolation with some acerbity and sought compensation in other quarters. He was careful of his career, knowing how easy it is to fall down the Army ladder, he paid court to the daughter of the Battalion's colonel with the same regard for tact and a proper keenness as he employed in his conduct towards his senior officers. But he was not of a firm enough mould to subsist on long-term expectations of advancement. He had to have his fling. And, what with one thing and another, he usually got out of bed on the wrong side and had to work a little blood out of his system before he could sit on his table and argue politics or swap dirty jokes with Sergeant Crumb, his principal stooge, or Private Norris, his clerk general who had a classics degree, an LLB, a mind of his own and a stoop that barred him from promotion.

"Quiet night last night, sir," Taffy said amiably when the hair-combing stage had been reached and a measure of civility might be expected.

"Was it, hell!" the OC replied, wincing his face. "Mix me a dose of Andrew's Health Salts, Thomas. They're in my valise."

"Very good, sir."

"What sort of a morning is it?"

"Nothin' partic'lar, sir What do you want for to-night, sir?"

"My S D suit and my Sam Browne, best shoes and walking out cap I don't want any silvo stains on it, either"

"Very good, sir"

The vexed look left the harsh young face as he tilted the bubbling glass down his throat, beads hooked to the uncombed hairs of his moustache, it was pink at the roots and gold-brown at the tips "Gosh!" he said, "it makes you want to live a clean life always, tasting this sruff God bless Mr Andrews"

Having returned and breakfast with the rest of the lads on old Crocker's lumpy porridge and shrivelled bacon and greased tea, Taffy strolled off to collect his wheelbarrow and begin his second task, cleaning the lines He had sharpened a beech-stick to pick up the chip papers and litter, Curly Norris had suggested the idea, saying it gave the camp a better tone, made it more like a royal park Curly also wanted to indent for a couple of fallow deer, or if DADOS refused to supply them, purloin them from the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford He said Taffy should lead the raiding party, singing the War song of Dinas Fawr

"You will probably be put on a charge," he said "But what is a charge *sub specie aeternitatis*?"

He was always laughing behind his twinkling spectacles, and even if you didn't know what he was talking about, which was most of the time, his gaiety infected you and you laughed as well or wrestle with him.

When Taffy arrived outside the office Curly Norris was

just completing his housework. The office was swirling with smoke from the newly-lit fire and dust from the floor. Curly's first task was to sweep all the dust from the floor onto the tables and shelves and files. This ritual was always performed alone, before Sergeant Crumb arrived for the day.

Taffy halted his barrow and respectfully tapped the office door.

"Any old match-sticks to-day?" he shouted. "Any old match-sticks?"

"Take your dirty boots off my porch," Curly shouted. "A woman's work is never done, don't you men know that yet?"

Taffy jumped in and screwed his arm round Curly's neck. They were wrestling on the table when Sergeant Crumb appeared. At his bull's bellow they stopped.

"What the hell d'you think this is? A tavern?"

"Sorry, sarge."

"You'll apologise to the OC if I catch you at it again, either of you." He smoothed the underside of his waxed moustache with a nicotine-stained forefinger. "What sort of a mood is he in this morning, Thomas?" Sergeant Crumb always arranged the morning programme on the basis of Taffy's report.

"Got a liver on this morning, sarge," Taffy replied. "Shouldn't be surprised if it turns to diarrhoea."

"I saw him in the Royal at closing time," Sergeant Crumb said. "He was buying drinks all round, so I expected he'd be off his food. Get cracking, Norris. Get the correspondence sorted out, let's see what there is. Then get down to the stores and warn Rosendale to appear before the OC. I saw him in town last night when he should have been on duty. Make a charge-sheet out before you go. Section 40—conduct prejudicial

to good order Get weaving "

Curly thought it a pity there wasn't a mantelpiece for the sergeant's elbows and a waistcoat for his thumbs

"Very good, sarge "

"And you get down to cleaning the lines, Thomas What are you hanging about here for?"

"Want to see the OC" Thomas said

"Too busy," the sergeant replied, stiffening his weak chin
"Get out "

"I can see the OC if I want to," Thomas replied

"A-ha!" laughed the sergeant, his shallow blue eyes turning foxy "Getting a bit Bolshie, are you? What with you and Rosendale in the detachment we'd better hoist the Red Flag, I'm thinking " He straightened up, blew out his chest, hardened his characterless eyes "Get out!" he shouted

Curly wasn't laughing now He looked serious, bothered and unhappy The way these foolish and unnecessary rows blew up, these continual petty litigations springing from bad temper and jealousy and animosity, why did they allow their nerves to become public? Why couldn't they hold their water?

Taffy stayed where he was, stubborn and flushing He had a bony ridge at the base of his neck, a strong chin and a knobbly receding forehead Huge-shouldered and rather short and bandy in the leg, he gave the appearance of animal strength and latent ferocity

"That was an order," the sergeant said

"OK " Taffy replied "But I'm asking to see the OC You can't refuse "

The sergeant began to hesitate, grew a little sick at the mouth, fiddled with the paper-cutter

"What d'you want with him?"

"I want to get into a Commando," Taffy said

"You'll get into a glasshouse, maybe," the sergeant laughed unpleasantly, not at all sure of himself now

"Yes, for knocking you between your pig's eyes," Taffy said

An immediate tension, like the shock of an electric charge, and silence

"You heard what he said, Norris," the sergeant snapped "I'll want you as witness"

'Hearsay doesn't count as evidence,' Curly said quietly

"What did you say?" Sergeant Crumb swung livid on him

'You bloody little sea-lawyer, are you trying to cover him?'

"No I'm not covering anybody I simply happen to know that legal procedure excludes my repeating something alleged to have been said by a person not formally warned

Sergeant Crumb wrote some words on a sheet of paper

'Well see,' he said, uncertainly "Now get out"

Taffy shrugged his shoulders and slouched out He hadn't meant to say that Not out loud All the same, it was OK by him He pushed his barrow down the muddy path to the stores shed

Rosendale was shiving in his shirt-sleeves His mirror was a splinter of glass an inch long stuck into a packing case There was a heap of straw in one corner of the shed, the men were changing the straw of their palliasses, he, as store-man, was in charge, he gave more to some than to others—not to his friends, for he had none, but to the important people, the lance-jacks and the lads with a tongue in their heads who determined public opinion in the camp Rosendale was very sensitive to public opinion, partly because it affected his own advancement, partly because he was politically conscious and wanted to form a cell to fortify his somewhat introvert ideas.

He was inept as a soldier, too untidy and slow to get a stripe, consequently he posed as a democrat refusing to be bought over to the ruling classes by a stripe, as one of the unprivileged millions who would be deprived of power and exploited by the boss class for just as long as they were content to endure it. He wasn't making much headway in his campaign. His ideas were too dogmatic to convince men who saw life as a disconnected series of circumstances and poverty as a natural ill and active political opposition as both unpatriotic and unpleasant, something that might get you CB, or your application for a week-end pass rejected. He was popularly known as Haw-Haw.

"Morning, Rosie," Taffy said, having recovered his equanimity. "Had a tidy sleep, love?"

"Be damned I didn't," Rosendale grumbled. "I slept in that bleeding straw in the corner there and a goddamn mouse crawled under my shirt and bit me under my arm. I squeezed him through my shirt and the little sod squirted all over it."

"Well, you'd better brass yourself up, Rosie," Taffy commented, "'cause the snoop has pegged you for being out of camp last night when you were on duty. I'm on the peg, too. So don't start moaning." At such moments Rosendale lacked the dignity and calm bearing of the representative of the unprivileged millions. He became an anxious frightened little man seeking an excuse, a lie, an alibi. "Curly'll come down with the charge in a minute," Taffy said reassuringly. "He'll tell us what to say, Curly will."

Curly brought the mail with him when he came. There was a letter for each of them. Rosendale was too het up to read his letter, he threw it without interest onto the table and bit his nails until the other two had read theirs. Taffy was a slow reader. Rosendale fiddled and shuffled, tears almost

touching the surface of his eyes "My missus is bad again," Taffy said, staring at the soiled cheap paper on which a few slanting lines had been pencilled in a childish scrawl. Big crossed kisses had been drawn under the signature "She can't touch her food again and her mouth is full of that yellow phlegm I told you about, Curly. And the rain is coming in since the last air raid."

"Why doesn't she go into hospital?" Curly said. "She's on the panel, isn't she?"

"I don't know proper," Taffy said, rubbing his face wearily. "I used to pay insurance when I was in the tinplate works, an' she's been paying twopence a week to the doctor. But *be* don't know what's up with her. I fetched him down last time I was on leave, anybody could see she was bad. All yellow and skinny, pitiful thin she was. Not eating a bite, neither, not even milk or stout, but only a drop of pink pop when she was thirsty. I made her bed for her in the kitchen to save her climbing the stairs. I stayed in every night with her. Had to go drinking in the mornings with my brother and my mates. And she was spitting this yellow stuff all the time, see? Very near filled a pisspot with it every day."

"Well, you've got to get her to hospital," Curly said. "What the hell is that doctor doing? It sounds criminal to me."

"I told her to see another one," Taffy went on. "But my mother-in-law it is, she swears by him, see? He's delivered all her kids for her, and he helped my missus through with the twins. So she won't change him. She won't go against her mother, see, Curly?"

"What the hell does a mother-in-law matter?" Curly said sharply. "Look here, Taff. You've *got* to get home and *carry* her to hospital *yourself* if you don't want her to die. D'you understand? Especially with all these air raids. It's cruel to

leave her alone"

"But what about the kids? She can't take them to hospital with her"

"Get them evacuated Or send them to your mother-in-law's"

"What? That bastard?"

"I'd like to knock your head off, Taffy," Curly said with cold and exasperated anger

"I wouldn't care much if you did," Taffy replied, suddenly plunged in despondency Like his temper, which had flared against the sergeant, his blues came on him without warning

"Come on," Curly insisted crossly "Pull yourself together It doesn't matter about you It's your wife and kiddies I'm thinking about Get up to the office and show this letter to the OC You've got to get home"

"Catch him giving me a forty-eight hours leave after Crumb has told him what I said," Taffy said, hang-dog

"I'll see Crumb at once and ask him to hold the charge back," Curly said, turning to go

"What about my charge?" Rosendale asked He had been hanging round the fringe of Taffy's trouble, like an uncomfortable curate with a dyspepsia of his own "Can't you talk it over with me, Curl?"

"Your charge isn't important," Curly said, hurrying out

"Bloody intellectuals! They're all the same, the pack of them," Rosendale muttered

Sergeant Crumb was already closeted with the OC when Curly got back to the office The Nissen hut was divided into two rooms by a central plywood partition with a door Curly stood by the door listening

They were talking about Sergeant Crumb's wife It was a

matter of long standing, and Curly knew enough about it from the sergeant's occasional confidences to see that he had been ruined by it so gradually and completely that he himself didn't know the extent or nature of the damage. He had joined the Army eight years back to get away from a powerful woman who had him tucked into her bed whenever she wanted him and who was pushing him to divorce his wife. He was afraid of ruining his business, a small garage, by the publicity of a divorce, moreover, he wasn't in love with either of the women though he slept with each in turn. So he joined up to let time and distance settle the mess. Oddly enough it was still unsolved. His wife had gone back to a factory job and taken a small flat. After several years he had called on her on leave, having been discarded by the other woman who preferred a civilian lover. He was very proud of that night. He had wooed his wife back to him, Gable had nothing to show him, he told Curly, recounting in some detail. So things reverted to the old ways for a while, until he received information from a sister of his who lived near his wife that his wife had another man, somebody in the works, a young fellow in a reserved occupation. It wasn't definitely established, Sergeant Crumb wasn't one to beard lions, he hadn't asked his wife point-blank, nor did he intend offering her a divorce. He preferred to use the welfare machinery of the Army. Through the OC he had got in touch with the regimental paymaster and requested him to investigate his wife's conduct through the local police with a view to stopping her allowance, to which he contributed fourteen shillings a week, if her guilt could be established. Meanwhile he continued to prove his manhood and independence by making love promiscuously wherever he was stationed, and displaying a definite penchant for married women. His heart

wasn't affected by the affair any more, his affections weren't involved. That was the whole trouble, it seemed to Curly. It was simply a matter of pride, of getting his own back. He took it out of his staff in the same way, blustering at them, telling the OC of their disloyalties and delinquencies, keeping well in with his chiefs, at once toady and bully. At the same time he was efficient and hard-working, smart at drill and a master of office routine and military redtape. His files were neat and complete, correspondence properly indexed, A.C.I.'s and Battalion Orders always to hand. Messing indents, pay rolls, men's documents were all open for inspection. The only man who knew that Sergeant Crumb depended entirely upon Private Norris, his clerk general, was Curly Norris himself. And because of his peculiar comic outlook on life he had no desire to split. It amused him to contemplate the sergeant's self-importance and it paid him to be useful in a number of small ways. He could get a weekend pass for the asking. He could use the office at nights to type out his private work—some learned bilge he was preparing for a classical quarterly—and as the war was a stalemate and the Command board had rejected his application for a commission after one look at his stoop, he had grown to consider these small amenities as perhaps more important than the restless discontent that produces poets or heroes or corpses.

Having discussed his marital affairs and got the OC to write another letter to the paymaster, Sergeant Crumb, as was his wont, made deposition against the malcontents, on this occasion Rosendale and Thomas. He suggested that each should be charged under section 40 of the Army Act. Curly, hearing the OC melt under the sergeant's reasoned persuasion, shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. He knew it was poor look-out

for Mrs Thomas's cancer of the throat. Certainly it was no use making any application at the moment The OC had given him two week-ends leave in the last six weeks, after air raids, to see that his wife was alright It was Taffy's own fault, the fool, for not getting her into hospital when he was home last And now they had no money Curly had already lent him his last train fare, and had no more cash to spare

Rosendale came in with a pail of specially sweet tea at that moment, hoping to mollify the powers But Sergeant Crumb's voice was unsweetened as he told him to get properly dressed and be ready to answer a charge in five minutes time

The upshot of it was that both men got seven days' CB and Curly a severe unofficial reprimand for attempting to shield Thomas The OC always enjoyed a little adjudication It gave him strength

"Sod the Army!" Rosendale moaned, bitter and outraged 'King's Regulations be damned Better if they'd spent their time in strengthening the League-a-Nations or finding a living job for the unemployed or making things better somewhere, not pottering around with King's Regulations"

"What wouldn't I do to Mr bleeding Crumb if I met him in City Street after the war," Taffy murmured fondly

"A lot of use that is to your wife," Curly snapped

"Go on Rub it in," Taffy flared up, goaded to feel anguish at last Disconsolate, he wheeled his barrow off to the incinerator, and Curly returned to the office to write letters to his friends

Acting Captain Cochrane was sitting on the clerk's table, tapping his swagger cane against the brown boots Taffy had brought to a nice shine and chatting to Sergeant Crumb over a cup of luke-warm tea

"Well, Norris," he said with a sardonic grin "You see what comes of playing the barrister to a pair of fools "

"They're not particularly fools, sir," Curly replied with proper deference "They're both men Thomas has worked in pits and steel-works, he's taken the rap in Belgium, he's trying to maintain a wife and two kiddies—that's more than most of us have done "

"He's still a fool," the OC said "He's like the rest of the working people They've been too blind and stupid to help themselves when they had the chance They could have had Socialism any time in the last twenty years They've got the vote Why don't they use it to get a Labour government? Because they can't be bothered to lift a finger for their own interests I'm a Socialist at heart, but it's not a bit of good trying to help the people They don't want to be helped "

"It isn't entirely their fault, sir," Curly replied "The middle class hasn't helped them very much—the teachers and clergy and newspaper proprietors and business executives They've all thrown dust in their eyes, confused or denied the real issues and disguised selfish interests and reactionary politics to appear progressive and in the public interest, as they say They keep the world in a state of perpetual crisis in order to crush internal opposition by the need for national unity, and they buy off their critics by giving them minority posts in the Cabinet Appeasement at home and abroad, give the beggar a penny and expect him to touch his cap "

"Hot air," the OC answered, offering Curly a cigarette He always came in for a chat after giving anybody a dressing down, Curly surmised that it was a maxim of his that a man who is alternatively severe and humane wins the respect as well as the affection of his subordinates As a matter of fact

the men distrusted his geniality and called him two-faced. They never knew how to take him, before asking a favour of him they always consulted Taffy or Curly about his mood. They were nervous of him in a surly way, not from fear, but because they disliked being treated curtly without being able to retort on natural terms. "Would you like England to become Communist?" he continued.

"I should be quite acclimatised to the change after serving in the Army," Curly replied. "We live a communal life here, all our clothes and equipment are public property, nobody makes any profits, we serve the state and follow the party line."

"You think the Army is based on Lenin's ideas, do you?" the OC said. "That would shake the colonel if he knew it."

"He needn't worry," Curly said, laughing. "The Army hasn't got a revolutionary purpose. It has no ideas worth speaking of except a conservative loyalty to the throne and a professional obligation to obtain a military victory. King Charles I's ideas with Oliver Cromwell's efficiency. That's England all over. They never settle their differences, they always keep both sides going. The Royalists were beaten in the field, yet they dominate the Army. The Germans were licked, yet they've got Europe where they want it. There's plenty of class distinction in the Army, black boots versus brown shoes, but no class conflict. I could go on quite a long time like this, sir. It's more interesting than football." He laughed to hide his seriousness. He hadn't been speaking in fun, but he preferred to be taken lightly. He knew himself to be a perpetual student, introspective, individualist, an antinomian with a deep respect for the privacy of others. His gentle and slightly neurotic liberalism took the edge off his revolutionary convictions. He lacked the strength to defy

what is powerful in men, and he had no heart for extreme action. So he always preferred to be left in peace, to think and observe, his conflicts were within him. He had his own anguish.

"I tell you what's wrong with you, Norris," the OC said largely. Curly felt something wince in him. To be told again what was wrong with him. People were always presuming to do that, nearly always people who knew too little about him and about themselves. It wasn't so bad if they spoke from kindness and a desire to help, that hurt, but it was understood by him. But when a man, like this young fascist type with his muddled democratic ideas and his desire to exercise his power over men proffered him advice, he writhed like a split toad.

"You haven't got enough *push*, Norris. That's what's wrong with you. Too soft-hearted, not enough keenness. You don't go for things as if you wanted them."

Curly laughed.

"My ambitions aren't as tangible as yours, sir," he replied.

"Well, get some ambitions, then, for God's sake. Your life won't go on for ever. Get cracking."

"Very good, sir. I'll submit my scheme for defeating Germany to Sir John Dill immediately."

The OC shrugged his shoulders confessing to himself that here was another man who wasn't worth helping because he refused to be helped. He was browned off with fools.

"If you want to help anybody, you might help Thomas to get his wife into hospital, sir."

The OC snorted and narrowed his eyes.

"I know the difference between seven days CB and a weekend leave," he said curtly. "Thomas won't pull that old gag over me again." Curly hadn't enough vigour to insist. He

clenched his fists on the table, knowing how important it was that Taffy should get leave, knowing it suddenly with anguish. But, as so often, the conflict smashed itself up inside him like two contrary tides, and he said nothing because the intensity of his feelings made him impotent.

The door opened and Sergeant Crumb came in, followed astonishingly by a very dashing young lady. The sergeant was all smiles and deference, inclining his body courteously to her and pointing with a wave of his hand to the O.C. Curly stood to attention. The O.C. stood flushed.

"Lady to see you, sir," Crumb said urbane.

"Hector," the lady said, her rouge parting in a slow private smile. She held out her gloved hand, letting her fur coat fall open.

"But—but come in," the O.C. stumbled. He pushed open the door of his room and she swept through in a swirl of fur and silk and interesting perfumes. He closed the door after her, humbly.

"Gives you the impression of expensive cutlery," Curly said softly, "though I doubt whether she is stainless."

"It's the colonel's daughter," Crumb whispered, his head inclined and movements subdued as though he were in the presence of the saints.

Curly hoped she wanted some love, so that he'd have a little peace to write his letters. But he had scarcely started when the door opened and she came out again.

"Don't trouble to see me to the gate," she said. "I'm sure you're busy. This private will escort me."

"Not at all," said the helpless captain, following her out with her gloves.

"Stand easy, stand easy," Crumb said as the door closed.

behind them. "She must have been jilted or something," he sneered.

The OC came back in a hell of a tear

"Where's that bloody fool Thomas? Tell him to go to my billet and polish my shoes and Sam Browne till he can see his face in them And tell Rosendale I want to take a message for me At once "

"Very good, sir," Sergeant Crumb leapt to it, realising the situation was urgent The room was suddenly in a turmoil, as though the young lady had been a German parachutist

The OC took a sheet of paper and scribbled a quick note, put it in an envelope and threw it into the OUT tray

"Tell Rosendale to deliver that when he comes, Norris,"

He put on his service cap, took his stick and gloves and went out He was excited and flustered Probably going to cool off by catching the sentry sitting down or the cookhouse staff eating the men's cheese rations, or the fatigue party throwing stones into the cess pool they were cleaning

Rosendale came and collected the letter

"Forgot to lick the envelope," he said "What is it? Is there a war on?"

"Run away," said Curly, weary of everything

Rosendale cycled out of camp and down the road till he was out of observation Then he opened the letter and read it through

"Dear Eva," it said "Sorry I can't meet you to-night as we arranged I'm on duty again and won't be able to see you this week I seem to have so little free time these days that I doubt whether it's worth our while carrying on any more. What do you think? Affectionately yours, Hector Cochrane, Capt "

"Hector Cochrane, Capt" Rosendale repeated, curling his lip. He cycled down coast to the town, knowing where to go, he had been to the little street behind the gasworks on other occasions. Miss Barthgate was the name, and very nice, too. Smart little millinet, deserved better luck than to fall in love with *him*. Rosendale's mind was working by devious ways. He'd seen the flash dame in the fur coat with rich smells about her. Maybe he'd get a bit of his own back for that seven day's CB.

He knocked at the door, propping his cycle against the wall. She worked in the parlour, he could see the sewing machine through the window. But the place sounded quiet to-day, as though she hadn't started working yet.

There was some delay before she opened the door. She was in a loose-fitting frock let out at the waist. Her face was nervous, her dark eyes looked dilated. Her beauty seemed agitated, on pins. "Yes?" she said, almost breathing the word, at the same time holding her hand out for the note he held between his fingers. Grinning a little, Rosendale handed it to her, watched her read it, waited a long time while she tried to raise her head.

At last she looked up. She wasn't bothering to hide anything. He could see it as clear as daylight.

"There's no answer," she said.

"No," he replied. "No answer," He shuffled, half turning to go. Then he looked up at her shrewdly.

"He isn't on duty," he said. "I thought I'd tell you. I shouldn't mind about him if I were you."

"No," she said, looking at him vaguely with her unutterable distress.

He had intended to say more, but her look confused him.

He turned, mounted his cycle, and pedalled off. She didn't move all the time

There was a new sensation buzzing through cookhouse, stores, office, and guardroom when he returned. The sentry told it him as he cycled through the gate, and because of it he decided to withhold his own bits of gossip till the chaps would be readier to appreciate it. He didn't want any competition.

The news was that Taffy Thomas couldn't be found anywhere. His denim overalls were on the floor by his bed, his best battledress and respirator were missing. He hadn't answered Crocker's quavering version of Defaulters bugle, he hadn't come forward to shine the O.C.'s Sam Browne. He'd done a bunk.

Curly was waiting for Rosendale with another message, this time for the Swansea police, asking them to visit Taffy's house at night and instruct him forcibly to return by the next train. The O.C. had said something about a court-martial, it would be the colonel's charge at least. That meant probably 28 days' detention and no pay for himself or his wife. It was a bad business, all things considered, but Curly was glad Taffy had gone. Perhaps he'd save his wife's life, 28 days was cheap at that price.

Acting Captain Cochrane had a considerable liver by the end of the afternoon. The men had been dozey and idle all day. He'd gone round bollucking them right and left. The latrines hadn't been cleaned, the washbasins were still littered with rusty blades and fag-ends when he inspected them after lunch. The cesspool stank and the fatigue party complained that there wasn't any hot water for them to clean up afterwards. All the plugs for the washbasins were missing, the kit was

untidily laid out on the beds, the rifles hadn't been pulled through since he inspected them last. He was in no mood to be accosted. When he saw Eva waiting for him at the bottom of the lane he had already had too much.

She was wearing a plain mackintosh, a loose-fitting burberry, and a little green hat with turned-up brim like a school-girl. Her hands were in her pockets, her eyes on the ground. He knew she'd seen him, but she wasn't able to look at him approaching. He walked smartly towards her, very military in his swish greatcoat and service cap flat over his eyes. His face looked narrow and sharp under the severe cap, his fair moustache and rather pointed teeth giving him a stoatlike appearance. When he was within a couple of yards she looked up and her eyes were wide and lambent, looking at him for some sign.

"Well, Eva," he said. He coughed and looked at his wrist-watch. "You got my letter, didn't you?"

She stayed looking at him with her pale searching face and her dark transparent eyes. Damn it all, she had a nice face. Was she going to cling? Why did she take things so seriously?

"Well? Say something, Eva."

His voice was softer, the least bit softer.

"I got your letter," she said. "That's why I came to see you."

"Well, you know I'm on duty, then?" he tried it out, not so sure that he wanted to finish it for good just yet.

"That's what you said," she replied.

He flushed, but she had turned away from him.

"Well?" he queried, his voice hardening. He wasn't going to be pried into. If his word wasn't enough for her, OK chief!

She looked up again. He noticed she hadn't powdered herself very carefully, her nose had a thick patch on it.

"Hector," she said, putting her hands on the immaculate breast of his greatcoat "Don't you understand, darling?"

He was swept with impatience. His success with women was about equal to his ignorance of them. He wasn't going to have any sob stuff, thank you.

"How the blazes d'you expect me to understand?" he said roughly.

"Well," she said "There is something to understand."

He quailed under her sudden precision of mood, she knew what she was going to do now, she wasn't leaning on him, beseeching him with her eyes. She was very quiet and firm.

She looked at him and he got scared.

"There's nothing serious, Eva, is there?" his fear prompted him.

"It is serious," she said.

"Darling," he gasped.

He was horrified of the consequences, infuriated with her for getting into this mess, and, for the first time in his life, even if only for a minute, in love.

He spoke slowly, stopping to think.

"Can't you see a doctor, Eva? There are some doctors, you know —"

"I don't want to," she said, still with this ridiculous composure.

"But — but you ought to," he said.

"I can do as I choose," she replied.

He said nothing, sensing a hopeless deadlock.

"Eva," he said at last.

"Well?"

"We could get married at the Registry Office next weekend if you like," he said, slowly, never taking his worried eyes off her. She was silent, as if listening to his words again and again in her mind.

He felt a growing exhilaration, a new and wonderful simplicity in him, like sunlight slowly breaking.

"Shall we?" he asked, holding his hand out.

She looked up again. This was always the most active thing she did, disclosing her eyes. Her hands all the time in her burberry pockets. She was reluctant to answer, there was a sweetness in the possibility, a reflection of his own momentary sincerity. It was what she had come for, to hear him say that, because he had said these words she was happy. She had no sense of tragedy or of shame. She felt indifferent to the future.

"No, we can't get married," she said slowly at the last.

Something in him was suddenly overpoweringly relieved. He had no sense of a durable daily happiness, of a long companionship in love, but only romantic impulses, like sunlight, and harsher emotions.

'But why not?' he asked, trembling.

"Because—oh well," she mumbled, seeking blindly to bind up her thoughts into the certainty that was still inchoate in her, "because you—don't ——" she turned away, and in profile he saw her lips finish the sentence—"love me."

Her courage shamed him into a greater confusion. He flushed and lost his head and was just about to gallop into the breach with protestations of devotion when a four-seater army car swung round the bend and pulled up with a screech and shudder.

"Christ," he gasped, this time in a real fluster. "Look out."

He sprang to the car and saluted.

The colonel half-opened the door

"Just coming to see you, Cochrane Expected to find you in your office, not flirting on the roads"

"Yes, sir."

"Hop in, Quickly I want to get back."

"Yes, sir"

The car surged forward

Eva watched it go By herself She pushed her hair back, rubbing her cheeks, rubbing the cold sweat off her forehead Heavily she turned and walked slowly along the road

The colonel looked into the first Nissen hut

"These bricks round the fireplace," he said "I sent an order to all detachments that they be whitewashed Why haven't you done it?"

"No whitewash, sir "

"Get some Christ What are you here for?"

He picked up a pair of boots from one of the men's beds

"These boots. Burnt Look at the soles Burnt through Drying them by the fire Is this man on a charge?"

"Er, no, sir "

"Why the hell not? Nation can't afford to waste boots every time they get wet. Christ Send him to me to-morrow under escort "

"Yes, sir I don't believe they *are* burnt, sir The man has been waiting for a boot exchange for five weeks He's worn them out ——"

"I tell you they're burnt. Christ man, you're not a cobbler, are you?"

"No sir "

"Then talk about something you know."

By the time the old man drove off Captain Cochrane was utterly emasculate. He saluted with so pathetic and servile a gesture that the colonel didn't even return the salute. And so his day ended. The duties of the evening confronted him. Dinner in mess, then dance attendance on the old man's daughter Poleworth was the name. Less respectfully, when the subalterns were hidden away in a pub, the name was sometimes garbled to Polecat. She certainly had a pungent odour. Still, hardy men said she was a good sport. She liked to play, they hinted, twisting the yellow ends of their moustaches. Captain Cochrane emptied his whiskey flask before deciding on his tactical plan. Marvellous thing, whiskey.

Curly took a walk after drinking his mug of tea and eating a piece of bread and marge and a Lyons' fruit pie. He didn't wash or brass up. He wasn't going to town. He wanted some peace of mind, along the sand dunes running from the harbour to the boarding house promenade where the ferroconcrete seaside resort began. Faintly, as though his tedious preoccupations had taken a musical form, the distant sound of hurdy-gurdy jazz songs blaring in the fun-fair touched his quietness, accompanying him unobtrusively as he climbed the loose sand. Thinking of the industry of pleasure he watched the sea, fuming like a thin grey smoke far far out beyond the mudflats, and it seemed as though the purpose of the town had been lost, the balance between sea and land ruined, the fundamental element forgotten. Pleasure had broken away from simplicity, the penny-in-the-slot machine had conquered the sea, people had turned their backs and were screaming with laughter. Watching the sea fuming and grey he found himself suddenly investing the solitary person walking slowly and with down-

cast head across the wet wormcast mud with all the attributes which humanity, he decided this evening, had rejected. He wanted to speak to this lonely person, it was a woman, heavy she was, heavy with the rejected attributes of humanity, pregnant she must be, and pale with a serious beauty, bearing so much in her.

Following his fantasy, he walked down from the dunes and across the slimy front towards the girl. He walked quickly, keeping his attention on her, refusing to allow the usual inhibitions to stop him accosting her.

Eva felt no particular strangeness at his approach. A little soldier with spectacles and curly hair like a wire brush. It was quite natural. She said good evening. She was glad he had come.

"I was standing on the dunes," he said. "And there was nobody but you anywhere at all. And so you became important to me, so that I came to ask you something."

"Don't ask me anything," she said.

"No, I don't want to," he said thoughtfully.

"Will you take me back to the land?" she said, looking at him, holding her hand out to him uncertainly.

Her face was as he had imagined it, young and hollow, large hollow-eyed, luminous and vague with distress.

He took her cold hand and led her back to the firm land, the grass and rocks and walls and telegraph poles and houses. In silence.

"Have you ever tried to die?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"What shall I do now, then?" she asked again.

"Walk," he said. "Pick a flower. Hurt your shin against a rock. Keep doing things like that for a bit. Do you like coffee?"

"Yes," she said, thinking back to the taste of such things
"Yes I like coffee "

"Shall we go and have some, and some chocolate biscuits,
in the Marina? ' he asked

"Yes," she said, very seriously "That would be nice "

She looked at the people having coffee and peach melbas
and spaghetti on toast at the little green tables, soldiers and
girls, commercial men, ponderous wives on holiday with
children past their bedtime The waitresses rustling and slender
and deft, rotund and homely and competent, the warm shaded
lights falling on the flowery wallpaper The strangeness and
the fear gradually left her eyes like sugar melting in a lemon
glass She tasted the hot coffee slowly, and its warmth led her
to smile

"Why do you look so serious? she asked Carly

He looked at her all the time She could see the gathering
of his thoughts in the dark blue eyes magnified and concentrated
by the curved lenses of his spectacles

"Funny, you having blue eyes, she said

Looking at each other over the wispy coffee steam, each
wanted to be confessed in the other, each desired to share
a new yet ancient community of interest Neither of them could
think now of how different they were, the one from the other,
how insulated by separate compulsions and circumstances

"I live near here Shall we go and sit by the fire?" she
asked

"I'd like to," he answered

"It's only an electric fire, she said, as he opened the glass
door for her

There were two photographs on the mantelpiece of her
little bedsitter Carly noticed they were both men in uniform

Brothers? Or lovers? Also a sewing machine and dresses half finished. A reading lamp and *Picture Post* and *Lilliput* and a *Sunday Pictorial*

"I haven't got a shilling for the meter," she said.

He produced one.

"You're very good," she said to him, putting the shilling in the slot, bending down as she spoke "You stopped me committing suicide and now you've given me food and money and—and what else?"

"What else?" he repeated, his sensitive mind crushed by the sledge-hammer blow of her casual confession

"I don't know," she said, standing up and smoothing her navy skirt down, picking bits of fluff off her knees "I don't know what I'm talking about"

Her sick soul was in her eyes

He stayed with her till late in the night, putting another shilling in the meter, going and queuing outside the chip-shop for some fish cakes for their supper while she set the little table and boiled the kettle and cut some bread and butter The reading lamp on the table, and she telling him about dress making, and the poverty she was in now there was no material purchasable, and the requirements of her clients, and their sexy confidences She was recovering herself and he watched her judgment returning gradually as her comments on people and things reached further and further out from the touchstone of herself, radiating like ripples from a stone dropped into a pond She had no politics or plans, no criteria, except herself her intuitions and feelings aversions He wanted to restore her self to her, so that she could continue living from day to day, thought to thought, with continuity

They were talking about the army, to-night it seemed a

remote unreal topic, a social problem which could be discussed or dropped as they chose In the same unreal mood she said

"My husband liked the Army. He's the one on the right there He had a good time in France, till suddenly it all happened."

Curly crossed to the mantelpiece and looked at the smiling R.A.C. sergeant in his black beret, a powerful smiling man, confident and untroubled

"He never bothered about things," she said "He liked tanks and so he liked the war I don't think he bothered about dying, or being away from me. He just married me one leave, that's all He wouldn't have a baby. It never occurred to him And now he's dead A whole year now he's been dead. I've forgotten nearly everything about him"

Curly looked from the second photograph in consternation

"You know Captain Cochrane?" he asked

"He's been coming here a lot," she said "He's had enough of me now, though"

How weary she sounded, telling him all these elemental facts in a flat indifferent voice

"I should have thought you'd had enough of him," he said "He's a poor piece of work You shouldn't have let him take you in He's nothing at all, just cardboard and paste"

She smiled, lighting one of his cigarettes

"Would you have saved me, if you'd known me six weeks ago?" she asked "I met him in the Plaza at a dance, just six weeks ago Would you have stopped him touching me?"

"It's your own affair," he said "If I'd known you I would have"

"Could you have?" she teased him "Could you make love as gifted as he did?"

"I don't suppose so," he said "I'm not a cinema fan Nor am I very enthusiastic about that sort of thing. You know what he used to say? He used to say he had a lot of dirty water on his chest and he knew a woman who would swill it out for him"

"You're not preaching to me, anyway," she said "You're hitting hard, aren't you?"

"I could hit much harder," he replied

"I can't help it now," she said, dejected "He offered to marry me, there's that to be said for him, only he didn't mean it"

Curly went hot and sticky, as though there were filthy cobwebs all over him And at once the old despair touched him with its dry unavailing fingers as when he had tried to get a short leave for Taffy Thomas to see to his wife

It was difficult for him to go now Yet she didn't want him to stay She was normal again, and consequently beginning to understand the task that was on her, the mess she had made, the immense fatigue She turned on the wireless, late dance music, mawkish and sticky They both stood up

"Shall I come and see you again?" he asked

"Yes," she said "Yes Unless I go away from here"

"Where to?"

"I don't know," she said "Where do you go to have a baby? Are workhouses open for that? Or I'll go to my sister-in-law She evacuated to her father's farm in Borrowdale I won't go yet Not for a few months Perhaps I won't go at all"

She was only talking round and round

On his way downstairs he bumped into somebody, stood against the wall to let him pass, recognised Captain Cochrane, smelt his hot whiskey-sweet breath, and hurried out into the

black streets and the unhurried stars

Anglo-German hostilities, held in abeyance during the daylight, resumed at a later hour than was customary this particular night. The operational orders of the Luftwaffe gave a certain unity to the experiences of Taffy Thomas, Curly Norris, Captain Cochrane and the women with whom they were connected—a unity which would not have existed otherwise. Taffy reached Swansea on a lorry conveying sheep skins from slaughterhouse to warehouse just as the first Jerries droned eastwards along the Gower coast, droned lazily towards the dark sprawling town and released beautiful leisurely flares into the blackness below. Taffy was hungry and thirsty and broke, not even a fag-end in his field dressing pocket. So he didn't mind a few extra inconveniences such as air raids. Life was like that at present. He wasn't expecting anything much. He hurried past his habitual pubs, past the milk-bar where he had eaten steak and kidney pies on his last leave and been unable to get off the high stool on which he sat, drunk at one in the afternoon and his kid brother just as bad at his side, bloody alright, boy, and as the first bombs screamed and went off with a sickening shuddering zoomph down the docks way, he turned into his own street and kicked the door with his big ammunition boots. It was about the same time as Curly went into Eva's flat, and Captain Cochrane bought the polecat her first gin and lime. Taffy's missus was in bed on the sofa in the kitchen, she couldn't get up to let him in, she'd gone too weak. He had to climb the drainpipe to the top bedroom and squeeze through the narrow sash. She knew who it was as soon as he kicked the door with his big boots, 'co she wasn't frightened when he came downstairs only ashamed, ashamed that she was such a poor wife, so useless a vessel for his nights,

skinny thighs and wasted breasts and dead urges.

"Hallo, mun," he said with his rough vigour, picking up the newspaper and glancing at the headlines. "Still bad? Where's the kids? Up in your mother's?"

"She ferched them up after tea," she said, "'gainst there's a raid"

"By yourself, then?" he said. "Good job I come Got anything to drink?"

"No," she said, ashamed at being such a poor wife "I'd 'ave asked mam to go down the pub for a flagon if I'd thought you was coming"

"What about yourself?" he asked "Still drinking that old pink lemonade? Can't you drink a drop of milk or tea or oxo or something yet? Still spitting that old yellow phlegm up, too, by the looks of that pisspot I don't know, bach" He sat on the edge of the sofa and put his hand idly on her moist tangled hair. "I don't know what to do Curly said for to take you to the hospital I think I'd better, too Shall I carry you to-night?"

"No," she said, frightened "You can't now It's blackout and there's bombs again, and I doubtr there won't be a bed there And you got to pay, too" She pushed her bony hand slowly across the soiled sheet and touched his battledress "I don't want to go there," she said.

She was too weak to wipe the tears out of her eyes

"Oh Jesu!" he said, getting up in a temper "Don't cry, then I was only suggestin' Do as you like Wait till to-morrow if you like Only I was thinking the redcaps will be coming round to look for me to-morrow"

"Never mind about to-morrow," she said.

"The cat's been pissing in the room somewhere," he said,

sniffing about him He sat down again and wiped her eyes with the sheet

"You got to mind about to-morrow," he said

"Remember you was jealous of me in a dance at the Mack-worth when we was courting?" she said "You took me out and slapped me in the face, remember?"

"What about it?" he asked slowly, nonplussed

"Slap me now, again," she said

He laughed

"I'm not jealous of you no more," he said "You get better, and then p'r'aps I'll get jealous again, see?"

She smiled and let her neck relax on the cushion

"You'll never be jealous of me again," she said, looking at him with her far away eyes

Her soul was in her eyes, and it wasn't sick like her body

The bombs had been falling heavier and heavier, and neither of them seemed to notice Till the light went out, and then he cursed filthily. The fire was nearly out, it was cold sitting with her all the time He tucked her icy hands under the blanket.

"I'm going out for some coal," he said

"There's none there," she said "The coalman's killed"

"Christ, there's plenty more men not killed," he said "I'll get some from next door, then"

"Don't go," she whispered

The house shivered and plaster fell in a stream of dust, as if from an hour-glass

"Can't sit in the cold all night," he said "And the dark I won't be a minute"

He slipped the latch and went out into the burning night, straight out into a screaming bomb that tore the sky with its

white blade and flung him onto his face in the little backyard and brought the house crashing down with its mighty rushing wind

The Luftwaffe's secondary objective concerned Captain Cochrane's harbour. The raid began at midnight, by which time Swansea had nothing to do except stop the big fires spreading and wait for the morning to come. Taffy had called at his mother-in-law's, and seen the children, and at the police station, to tell them his wife was buried and ask them to inform his unit, and he was just walking around, trying to keep himself from freezing and crying and lying down in a doorway, when Captain Cochrane, who had also suffered some emotional disturbance, was getting out of Eva's bed and hastily pulling on his shirt and trousers in the dark. When he was half dressed he pulled the blind back to see what was happening. The searchlights were stretching their white dividers over the harbour, and yes, by God, they had a plane in their beam, a little tinsel plane, and the red tracer bullets were floating up at it from the Bofors by the sidings. Christ, it was a marvellous sight. He was thrilled stiff, trembling to sink his teeth into it, to draw blood. Where the hell were his shoes?

'I'll have to run,' he said brusquely, grabbing his cap and greatcoat.

Eva, motionless and dark in bed, said nothing at all. Of course he had to go, a soldier like him.

"Good-bye," he said, stumbling on the stairs.

Eva lay quietly, heavy and as though waterlogged, thinking of the Germans and the English, the soldiers of both sides, her husband and the excitement, the professional coolness with which, firing his two-pounder from the revolving turret of his pet tank, he died. And Hector Cochrane—she always thought

of his surname as well as his Christian name—that boy with glasses was right, he wasn't much of a man. When he had come in to-night, drunk and abased, begging her forgiveness—as if *that* was anything to give or to withhold—her infatuation had dissolved like a sudden thaw, leaving everything slushy. And as she stroked his spiky brill-creamed hair and let him sob into her lap she had felt how small and worthless the two of them were, clumsy bungling people of no moment, passive and degraded by their own actions. She had let him take her to bed. Anything was as good as nothing. He had written her a cheque.

Captain Cochrane had a haggard jauntiness arriving at the office the next morning. The ethical code of his profession forbade a man to allow a hangover to take the edge off his morning smartness. He behaved in the exemplary manner of a commissioned officer, inspecting the sleeping huts and the cookhouse and the sump, chewing up slovenly old Crocker for overflowing the swill bins, chasing the fatigue party who were rat-hunting round the sump, getting a shake on everywhere. Then to the company office for his morning correspondence. Ration indents, pay requisition, arrangements for boot and clothing exchange, a glance at the medical report to see who was scrounging to-day. Sergeant Crumb had everything in order, non-committal and deferential, soothing.

"Damn good show last night, sergeant," he said when he had finished his business. "Got a cigarette?"

"Certainly, sir" (Bloody cadger). "The Bofors crew are going on the beer to-night, sir, to celebrate knocking that Jerry down."

"Yes. Damn good show it was. All burnt to death, weren't they?"

"Yes sir. The plane was too low for them to parachute"

"Well, that's burnt their fingers for them Something towards winning the war"

"Yes sir."

A phone message Trunks Captain Cochrane speaking Good morning, sir.

This is Swansea police A private Thomas from your company, sir Yes? Called in at 0025 hours last night, sir Said his wife had been buried under a bomb, sir Christ, has she? That's bad luck Have you confirmed it yet? Not yet, sir Check up on it, please He's a bit of a scrounger If it's OK, put him in touch with the barracks They'll give him all the dope he needs Money Railway warrant OK? Yes sir If he's bluffing hand him over to the redcaps He's absent without leave Very good, sir. Goodbye Good-bye, sir.

"Thomas's wife Killed They must have had a raid as well"

"That's bad luck, sir I'll look up the ACI about coffins I think the civil authorities supply them, don't they, sir? RASC only issue them to soldiers She was ailing anyway, sir, I know."

"Check up on it, sergeant Also ring through to battalion and inform them. We'll send him a leave pass if necessary Keep the charge sheet, though He'll have to go before the colonel for absence without leave just the same"

"Very good, sir"

"Anything else, sir?"

"No I don't think so Oh yes, there's that return to the adjutant about anti-gas deficiencies I'll inspect all respirator contents at 1100 hours"

"Very good, sir"

"Christ, that reminds me. I've left mine in town Where's

Norris?"

"Up at your billet, sir, I sent him to clean your kit, sir, being that Thomas your batman isn't available."

"Send a runner up, then Tell him to go to this address"—he scribbled it down, sergeant Crumb hiding the faintest wisp of a smile as he did so— "and ask for my respirator Miss Eva Barthgate is the name"

He smiled, too They were both men

"Very good, sir"

Sergeant Crumb saluted smartly and withdrew

Captain Cochrane yawned and put his feet up for a few minutes, and thought, well, that was that

Maybe he'd ask the old man to put him in for a transfer to the Indian Army. There were better prospects out there, on the whole.

THE CHILDREN

I

"CAN I go out *now*, then?" the child asked, sulky and heavy with impatience

His mother wiped the big meat dish carefully dry before replying "I think you're a tidy little boy at last," she said "Have you got a clean hanky?" She put the meat dish into the crockery cupboard on the kitchen wall and picked up the hand brush to dust the grate "Well, wipe your nose, then "

He stubbed his nose furiously, his eyes leaping with tears "I'm late," he said bitterly

She laughed softly at him, then knelt down to clean the twinkling grate and the worn rag mat she had made seven winters ago, the winter of the little boy's birth, of her husband's death

"Alright," she said "This grate eats a lot of coal I don't know how we can buy another load this month You'll have to bring me brushwood from the forest Don't be away long"

Released formally, he still hung there, sulkily waiting, unsatisfied He wanted her voice to be *real* again, not absent-minded, empty, as though she wasn't in her voice any more, and he was nothing but an old breakwater the high careless tide swept over listlessly He was more important than the grate or the coal or the house that always demanded attention from

her, always, always

"I won't go far," he said thoughtfully, he made no promise about *time*, he would stay out all day, he only promised not to go far. It was her own fault if she was so careless of him that he didn't notice that his answer was an evasion, not a promise. He felt like tearing her pinafore to bits, but to *bits*.

"Alright," she said, still absorbed in sweeping. "Go and play with the girls you'd rather not help me peel the apples and pluck the fowl."

He went Like a thunderbolt

On the way to the meeting place at the bottom of the dusty white lane he forgot his anger and his misery. There were white flints on the path, strange shapes, odd colours—not colours, either, but gleams, thrills, changers of texture, harmonies like the sky in the distance, in the evening from his bedroom window, tingling like silk on the flesh-tips of his fingers. He put the prettiest ones in his pocket, as a present for her. He forgot about the pebbles when he saw her. He didn't even notice they were slipping through his frayed trousers pocket as he ran to meet her. And that is as it should be, for Hansel and Gretel were neither sweethearts nor brother and sister, but simply children, and as children they did not know whether their parents were wicked and unkind, or good and gentle, nor whether their father was less to blame than their stepmother, nor did they drop the white pebbles behind them cunningly and with conscious resource. When they were together they forgot about when they were unhappy, or hungry-to-bed, did Hansel and Gretel.

She was sitting on the gate, dangling her tiny feet in their dainty home-made slippers.

"Where *have* you been?" she said with mock anger, de-

ceiving even herself "I've been waiting for ages," she lied

Scratch a lie and you find the truth Maybe she *had* only just arrived before him Nonetheless she had been waiting all day for this moment, this being together to plot and laugh and pretend, all the long morning, all the slow noon while dinner was preparing She had waited for the potatoes to boil, and had fretted with anger at her mother's measured ease, her mother's refusal to test the potatoes every five minutes with a fork to see whether they were soft enough, her mother's refusal to be hurried or show any concern for the ticking of time No wonder she was angry with him She was in love with herself, she demanded his homage

"Sorry," he said, flushing miserably, he hated apologising, it hurt him so, he felt so ugly and clumsy

Something was tickling her nostril, she scratched with her little finger, delicately, inside her nostril

"Where shall we go and live to-day?" she asked forgiving him capriciously, like Queen Elizabeth

"In the castle of the rocks in the meadow?" he suggested, eager with happiness now

"No I think we'll make a new house to-day," she said, picking her nose again, this time angrily with her thumb and forefinger

"Let's go into the middle of the forest, shall we?"

Her daring and resolution made him sway

"I promised not to go far," he said, doing his conscience the honour of mentioning its existence

"You're afraid," she taunted

"Silly idiot," he snapped "I'm not afraid You're the one who's always afraid"

"I'm not," she yelled back "Let's prove it Come on"

She slipped off the gate, exposing her pink cotton knickers.

"We'll go right to the middle of the forest, into the dark part, where the owls and the jaguars and the slinks are," she said, looking terribly reluctant now

But he wouldn't release her. He knew she'd be frightened when they got to the thicker where the sun was shut out by the dense branches where there was no sun or sound, but only strange furry sounds, disturbing the cruel sleeping eagles of the silence. She would clutch his hand and keep close to him, and *he* would be the strong one then. *He* would lead her back. He saw his greatness in her, and gladly went into the forest, into the dangerous unknown.

"There are soldiers in the forest," she said. "I heard them shooting this morning."

II

In the mind of man tale and truth and time are symbols of himself, of his ever-changing everlasting constancy. Many years pass between the telling of the tale and its recollection, between the act and its moral. Who can measure the time the two children spent in the forest? Who knows how long they were in the darkness, learning the taint and touch of terror?

The children got lost in the forest. They lost each other. Eternity of terror.

It was getting dark. The trees massed and deepened, roughed out in the dusk. The searchlights plotted the sky with bluish shifting diagonals, the enemy aircraft filled the low rain clouds with anger and doom, the anti-aircraft guns roared with thwarted uncertain malevolence. The clouds shredded and the

soldiers lying on their bellies behind the hurried parapet noted the glitter of the stars

Like a dream, like a bad dream, Hansel said in his mind The mountains fade like dying cultures, the trees fall away like the doomed fleets of Tyre, the violent red flash behind the hill's black spine is merchandise going to heaven, robes of white velvet

We are lost Ichabod, wail the prophets as they cower in the crannies, in the caves among the mountains We dream that we are lost We dream of war

The searchlights switched off and his mind fell into darkness

Gripping his rifle, he became aware of its impersonality, its mechanism, its impartial judgments, its refusal to discriminate between one man and another How strange that death should be so impersonal, *his* death

It was difficult to see, their patrols could come right up to the barbed wire without being seen If they didn't crack a twig, or stumble, they would be as pervasive as dreams, dreams of death

He couldn't think, not *think*, but only feel, like a blindworm He kept feeling the same things, again and again

Her face, her loved face came to him again and again, it had no features, her features were sponged out, drawn over, and she was trying passionately to reach him, to be visible to him He felt the passion of her, the trembling calm of her, the terror beneath her pride It disturbed him terribly, not seeing her face distinctly His mind was an embryo, struggling for release, for wholeness and form There was weeping, darkness of mind, locked and empty chambers in deserted corridors and pain moving in the blue vague light, roughing the blankets in the dim disinfected wards Babies crying indecently like trapped

rabbits, and men whimpering, and some beds silent, silent And the sisters noiseless and starched, smoothing the blankets that pain had pinched and disturbed. Like a bad dream, the trance of terrible anguish

It is all like a dream, he kept on saying We had such a wild and beautiful courtship, life revealed itself as incredibly beautiful, passionate, wonderful, terrible, like a dream We have married, signed the register in the vestry, paid the fee. We have made house, and she is with child by me, beautiful with child

Like a bad dream this war came, refusing to be averted, and we parted at the railway station She got smaller and smaller, waving all the time her useless and pathetic handkerchief, and then the endless journey.

But it is not as simple as that That is only fact, history, not life

Life LIFE, he said, exorcising the dream He chose to suffer, to live He suffered her absence, the ignorance of her health, her child, her mind, her dress consumed him. Longing for her, longing . But not like the first ignorant longing when his sex sang unsatisfied in him, and love was a brutal imperative in his blood And she withheld herself, leaving him sucked-out and vapid, without conversation for daily deeds or spirit for daily routine, imagining nothing, enjoying nothing, animal in food and breath Saying "I do not love her I do not love her. I only want her, to draw her into the darkness, into the destruction in me"

Ah! It was better, now he remembered that all that terror had been lived away, lived out She had come to him in the darkness, in the boarding-house bedroom at the week-end vil-lage and helped him, begging him to help her. In the darkness

of tossed sheets and heated bodies, blind with nakedness and desperate with failure he had lain in her soft voice, believing against himself that her words were true because *she* spoke them Her voice was the only thing he still knew in his immense unbearable agony She quieted his sobbing and held him close in sleep.

The second night, the third night, and after a month of other things, the fourth, fifth, sixth nights they were alone together she guided and loved him out of his hell, and by her faith she made apparant the miracle of beauty And on the sixth night she slept in his arms at last and he became the possessor of truth He had been so lonely, so lost and beaten, ad then success had been so violent, so hungry, and now he lay in the darkness, forgetting the two naked bodies, voyaging into infinite distances timelessly, beyond the intuitions and limits of sense and thought, wondering, wondering

And then, with a tremendous leap of joy he knew the truth The truth that all the attempts that are made to convince us that the flesh, the network of sense and nerve and appetite, is the dominant motif, had failed The spirit took on itself the knowledge and power of flesh, its power to move and act and be Every fatigue the army imposed on him, from cleaning latrines to burying his mates, was a test, a proof of the spirit How he loved his mother when he thought of her, those few years he grew up with her before she died, sitting by the fire in the clean-swept kitchen, darning the worn-out darns in his socks, patching the frayed patches of his trousers, neatly concealing the poverty of the garment with deft patient fingers, her tired bony hands had a soft life, a pride, a selfreliance that was also in her yellowing wasted face and grey dying hair, a grace But she had worked, understanding the necessity for work It was

the manifest of her spirit, her achievement the cottage, the child of her marriage, the poverty that purged her of grossness

And there he lay in the boarding-house bed, thinking of his mother darning by the fire, until his beloved stirred sleepily and woke softly to the gentle feel of his kisses

And love achieved its harmony with life at that moment. He could think of it now, as he lay against the parapet of the trench, simply and clearly, remembering the cottage in the woods, the northern pines that came down to the roof and brushed the mossy tiles whose green was a continuation of the forest's floor. And a magpie slanting across the clearing and his mother waving good-bye with the dishcloth in her hand as he went along the path to the meeting place, wondering whether she would be merry or teasing, secretive, wanting love, or excited with something, wanting to tell him about it.

He could see her face alright now, and hear her voice, the inflexions of her joy, the quiet of her when she was thinking of something she would soon say. Thinking of the child in her, the child in her eyes, in her womb. The earth was wet, it soaked through his elbow, making his fingers cold as they gripped the small of the rifle butt. The cold was inside his greatcoat, and he was dimly aware of hunger and the whispering of soldiers in the fire bay beside him in the starry night.

It was a dream, this wet earth, this loaded rifle, this danger. A dream easily thrown off, a flimsy veil. His spirit was awake and glad, glad of his birth, of his pain, his childhood, his joy, his calm manhood. For him there was no war, no darkness, and no suffering but the pure suffering of children.

When the grenade lobbed over the parapet and got him, the darkness was pure light, pure power. Her face, her presence

III

It was nearly dark when they came out of the wood. They could just distinguish the white lane. The owls were crying in the darkness of the high trees. They were still trembling and too relieved to talk. They hurried, hand in hand. They were thinking of the witch in the forest, how she had locked them in a cage of thorns and lit a great fire and fattened them as geese are fattened, and how Gretel had tricked the old hag, pushing her into the fire and releasing Hansel. But of course they would never *tell* anyone of this, not for years would they mention it even to themselves. Fear goes through the blood many times before it reaches the mind.

"Do you think we'll get a smacking for being late?" she asked.

"I 'xpect so," he said. "I said I wouldn't go far."

"I promised to slice the apples, too," she said.

They hesitated at the turning where they would part.

"I don't expect mummy'll give me any supper," she said.

"Never mind," he replied. "I won't eat any either."

But when he stood blinking in the fire-lit lamp-lit kitchen and saw the flames twinkle on the knob of the poker and the noses of the fire-dogs, and the white starched table cloth laid with meat pie, and apple tart sprinkled with sugar, and brown bread and butter piled on the board, he forgot. He loved his mother then, as he climbed the big wooden chair she had drawn up to the table.

"And don't think you can always spend your days playing in the field with girls and come home to find the table

groaning with meat pie, my boy," she said "Life isn't all fairy tales. Life isn't."

He liked the sound of her voice, its love and warmth and comfort. He didn't hear what she was saying, only the sound of it he understood. I was right, whatever she said. She *knew*.

"Children!" she said smilingly, pouring the boiling water on his cocoa and stirring at the same time. "I don't know how God ever dared let children come into this world. I don't indeed!"

She didn't mind, then. *She wasn't angry with them for being away from her.* The bread was thick with salty white butter

BALLERINA

THE stray dog that had picked up with the soldier as he strolled along the fields made fierce barking darts at the little spaniel from the whitewashed cottage, yelping and salivating and pawing it in a frenzy. The soldier stood smiling.

She came tripping through the short garden track in her usual negligée, bell-bottomed navy trousers and cable-stitched white jumper fitting warmly about her breasts, hair long and smooth down her neck, turning up in an even wave above her shoulders.

"Tony, Tony," she cried, "come away, you immoral little beast."

She picked the spaniel up before it fell to the male blandishments of the stray dog.

"Worse than death," she said, kissing his hot black snout. And then, seeing the soldier, "Hallo, soldier," she said. "Won't you come in? Have a beer?"

"O K." he grinned, like a big bear.

He followed her into the exquisitely simple whitewashed cottage.

She was alone in the house, except for him.

She put a great juicy log on the wide hearth; it spluttered at once, flames spurted out.

"You belong to the searchlight detachment in Windy Copse?" she said.

He grinned like a big schoolboy, taking the tankard of beer from her

"That's right," he said "How did you know?"

"I've seen you passing," she said "You're the signals man, aren't you?"

"That's right," he said, grinning "You know a lot"

"You shouldn't take my maid to the pictures if you want to remain a mystery," she said, laughing and refilling the beer mugs

She was very fine in the concealed smooth lamplight, a soft white glow against her delicate firm profile, the whitewashed wall behind her, her hair falling straight and silken to the curl in the nape of her neck

"All of us are crazy about you," he said "Up at the searchlight we call it a day if one of us has seen you We always tell each other if we've seen you, what you were doing and when and where"

She smiled, archly as a queen She was a great lady, no doubt of that, a painter or an actress of something unique

"They'll never believe I've seen in your parlour," he said "Not actually in your house"

"Better take my hanky then," she said, handing the little lace kerchief tucked into her sleeve

"Thanks," he said, breathlessly When he was embarrassed his neck began twitching, his chin rubbed against the rough collar of his battle dress He was heavy and simple in appearance

"How about some supper?" she said "I gathered some fresh mushrooms this morning, the dew is still fresh on them"

He smiled like a great fawn, bashful, wanting to go

"You're not on duty just yet, are you?" she said

"No," he said simply

He looked at the painting over the plain oak mantel and warmed his hands at the open hearth and looked at the open bookshelves and the delicate array of noble books. The soft lamplight covered him like the presence of a sheepdog. The little spaniel slept with his nose in the white fleece of the rug.

They ate mushrooms on toast and beer and black coffee.

"I'm not like the rest of them up there," he said, his chin twitching. "They like beer and dances and women and jokes, but I like being by myself. I like sad things," he said, "the stars and music you can't hear."

"Ycs?" she said, intrigued, her dark luminous eyes upon him. "Will you sing to me?"

"Yes," the soldier said. "If you want me to."

He stood up in his worn battle dress and his green gaiters, listening to the music he could not hear. His mouth paused on the brink of song. He began singing. Being a Welshman he sang with the great sadness that is in faith and understanding, the *hiraeth* of a people that has seen the goodness in itself going away, away. "Dafydd Y Carreg Wen" he sang for her in the lamplit whitewashed room with the books and the spluttering wood fire and the spaniel waking up and moving restlessly outside them, and she in her soft black silk and the darkness where the lamp didn't reach, but cast a soft shadow.

When he had finished he lit a cigarette by the fire, stooping over the flames quietly and naturally, and she watching him from the edge of the darkness.

"Are you happy to-night, soldier?" she asked.

"My wife was killed last month," he said, "in the blitz."

"Oh," she said, and all the glass crumpled and splintered inside her.

"I wasn't living with her," he said. "We were separated, you know. She was wrong in herself, you know"

"Oh," she almost sobbed, leaning her white hands out in pity from the shadow, and he smiling like a great boy ,

"You're young," he said, looking at her "Nineteen maybe?"

"Yes," she said

"I'm old," he said "Thirty-eight I am That's a lot, if what happens means much to you"

"I'm a ballet dancer," she said

"You won't dance if I sing?" he asked her

"If you sing with that sadness on you," she said "I will"

She danced as he sang the song of the dying poet, dying among the white boulders Her dance was dark flame moving in the darkness of the dying flowers and the white walls and the stillness

"There," she said, when she had finished, falling on the couch, lying on her back and closing her eyes

"My husband is in Libya flying a plane," she said "He doesn't love me now He is only flying"

"I know how it is," he said, picking up his respirator and forage cap from the corner "Well Nos da, 'nghariad 'i"

"Good-night, soldier," she said "And God bless you, for when I dance I know my husband is thinking of me and trying to get back to me"

"We are all like that," he said, crushing her lace handkerchief into his pocket, "I don't know indeed whether they'll believe me when I get back to camp."

"The searchlight is beautiful on starry nights," she said
And let him go

COLD SPELL

GRACIE worked in the Naffy on the aerodrome and it had begun with him buying coffee from her during the morning break, or before taking off of a winter morning on practice, or after dark on a raid. She always saw to it that his coffee was piping hot, the very first time she served him a cup she had heated it up for him.

"It's the first hot cup I've had in this joint," he'd said. "I reckon I ought to treat you to the pictures on the strength of that, Marlene." And that's when it really began, when she refused, disdainful at his banter. He had to wait till they met in a Paul Jones in one of the station dances. Maybe he *was* a flight sergeant and she a two-penny Naffy girl. Just the same she knew one man from another and the different attitudes the same man might contain. He flowed along like a river, altering as the ground altered, naturally, with never a thought about it. If it was beer and women he knew his stuff, or if it was just beer, or if he was browned off, and just wanted to talk to somebody quietly for a little. She made sure she became the sort he wanted to talk quietly to, so they sat in a corner, dust in their nostrils from the dance, talking a bit. Not about anything much—just the manageress of the canteen threatening to sack her for giving one of the boys credit, and why she never bothered with lipstick, and how they had told him to be a clerk in the R.A.F. and he'd made so many typing mistakes

that they put him to flying to get him bumped off, and the different kites he'd been in, and the rosey pilot who scared him to death so that he picked a fight with him at a dance and broke his ribs and got transferred to another kite whose pilot was as safe as a minister in the pulpit. Just chatting about each other's jobs, quietly, and at the end of the dance he said it was the first time he'd finished up sober since Christ knows when and he reckoned he ought to treat her to a drink on the strength of that. To which she was quite amenable.

You wouldn't think there were any complications, anything to snag the smooth current. They were both single, both unattached. He'd been on the station for eight months, which is an eternity these days, and he'd taken a few Naffy girls out in his time, and one of the girls told Gracie with thin-lipped spite that he was too fast for her, and another told her with a voluptuous serpentine triumph that he could certainly satisfy a girl. But Gracie wasn't so concerned with what he was before she fell in love with him. What mattered really was what he thought of *her*, whether she was more to him than a little dirty water to get off his chest. She knew pretty soon that she wanted him just like hell, and she knew she would go with him as far as ever she could. Only she knew herself, too, and she became afraid of him finding her out as she had found herself out. Somewhere in the part of a person that melts and flows and overwhelms there was a lump of ice in her that wouldn't melt, you see, just wouldn't, she had to stop, and go back, shamefully, because she never went far enough to realise herself. The only other complication was his job. Naturally they never knew when, nor did they think about it consciously. But it was like a fan in a room, blowing their hair a little even in the quietest hours. It got on his nerves sometimes, the long

flights and the flak and some of his mates not getting back, and he might be a lot of things then. He might be indifferent to her, or restless, wanting to get drunk, or peevish and sarcastic about love and settling down and that, or cynical. Only one thing he never was, in those unpredictable moods, he was never fast with her.

It was alright in summer, when she was free the same time as he. They were happy enough to go into the pinewoods and lie in the moss or the warm brittle ferns with soft beds of needles under their sides. They didn't want to be indoors. But autumn turned wet on the country and there was nowhere they could go. She never came off till nine-thirty, which was too late for them to go to the pictures five miles away. He couldn't take her into the sergeant's mess, and she only had the top bunk in a little partitioned stall she shared with another girl in the Naffy hut. She wouldn't take him there although the other girls was always telling her to, "only don't use the top bunk, you might break it," her room-mate said, or something suggestive like that. She'd die rather than take him to her poky little stall.

But they got fed up with lying in the hedges, and the rain, and shivering when they got up and brushed their clothes. He was getting to look ill, too, and his nerves were upsetting his system, he got real anaemic-looking. The food wasn't passing any goodness into his blood, and his body was getting full of hungers, and his mind began starving, too. If he got a shrapnel wound in that condition it wouldn't heal healthy, perhaps. She was worried for him, and got him to go to the M.O. for some drugs. It made him better, but he still had stomach trouble, and in the end she said she wouldn't go out with him any more if it rained or was cold. She kept her word, too. She

went to bed the first wet night they had a date She went to bed and wept herself to sleep And he went and got drunk.

So the next evening they were off together they decided to ask for a room at the few cottages strung across the rough land outside the drome She loathed doing it But he said What the hell, darling, why not? And they needed some place badly, so she went with him

When they walked up the garden to the first house, a little new ferro-concrete house with an Anderson in the vegetable garden, and he rang the bell and somebody got up inside and came along the passage, she shrank back behind his shoulder into the darkness

"Good evening," he said, in his politest

"Good evening," the woman replied, planting herself flat in the narrow passage "What is it?"

"I was wondering whether you could hire us your spare room for the evening," he said "Just for now and again"

"Heavens above," she said, taking a hissing deep breath "What do you think I am? This is a respectable house, do you understand? And that's enough"

She slammed the door They heard her bolt it

"Phew!" he whistled, pushing his cap back off his forehead the way he had "That's another bit of England I'm not fighting for. There's quite a tidy bit of this island in that category by now, Gracie"

She didn't say a word, and he felt her trembling under his arm He bent to kiss her but she averted her face

"Silly Gracie," he said softly, loving her for being wrongly ashamed

"Come on, Garbo Let's try again"

She took a lot of persuading, but she went in the end, under

duress, not speaking to him except yes and no

There was a cottage he knew along a lane, in the pinewoods south of the drome. He took her there. It was like Hansel and Gretel in the wood in the moonlight, walking down the rides where the felled trees lay in bright pools of water and the chopped wood was white as the breast of a chicken, and he was telling her how the south coast looked in the moonlight when you were coming home. They could see the hens sleeping on one leg in the run, and a little foal followed behind them. It was a nice place.

He knocked at the door after listening a moment to voices and good honest laughter. The door opened straight into the kitchen. "Come in, dear, because of the light," the woman said. "Somebody with you?" She peered out through her pebble glasses. "Come in, dear. I can't see you well. I'm like my blind hen."

They stood blinking in the yellow light of the paraffin lamp. The brown little kitchen was vague with smoke from the curling fire. She was a great Falstaff of a woman, a pinafore tied round her bulging body under her heavy bosom. She smiled at them, and it was a homely smile on her red pointy face. Her shoes looked as if they must split under the weight of her dropsical ankles.

"Do you want a room, dears?" she said.

Gracie nodded her head.

"Well, we can manage that, I'm sure. Sleeping out, or just for the evening?"—Gracie had woollen gloves on.

"Just for the evenings, mother," he said.

Gracie took her gloves off, so she could see there were no rings on her thin hands.

"You can have the parlour. It's got a sofa, and you can get

wood from outside if you don't mind the fire smoking. It's an old cottage, see, but I wouldn't change it, not for a mansion. I always say: Do what you can for people, specially for you boys and girls. We haven't got no neighbours, you see. There's only us, and it's a bit quiet just me and Walter—that's my husband—and our Muriel, that's an invalid since she was so high. And you get a rotten time, don't you, away from home? So sit down and have a warm. Give the young lady a bit of the fire, Walter."

She was asthmatic and stopped for breath. Her husband stood up with the slowness of a countryman, rubbing his bald head with his earth-rough hand and grinning amiably.

"Thank you so much," Gracie said, feeling ashamed of herself at such kindness.

"Well, we're very happy, Walter and me, the words flowed on a new breath. "Not sentimental, but we're very happy, ain't we, Walter?"

Walter grinned and scratched his head mopefully.

"Aye," he said.

"Don't scratch, it'll get worse," she said. "I always say you don't know how happy you are till something bad happens to you. Like one day Walter was taken with a stroke, digging in the garden and his shovel struck a stone and the shock sent him into a stroke. And I wasn't crying, but the tears was rolling down my cheeks. It was a Monday, the Monday before Whit-Sunday, and I didn't eat a bite of food not till the Friday, when the doctor said he'd be alright. Did I, Walter? See, you can't never tell in this life from one day to the next, so I say do what you can for people, I do."

So they used to go to the cottage, to Millie's, that was her name, and maybe they'd have a bit of supper with her, or

she'd bring a tray of cocoa and biscuits into the parlour where they lay on the sofa by the smoking wood fire. She told them a lot of things, especially Gracie, who sometimes came along there in the afternoons by herself, the Naffy being shut from two to six every day. She was always ready for a laugh, Millie was, she was a bit simple, Gracie thought sometimes, the way she imagined things and laughed helplessly at them. And then other times she'd be very sorry for herself and tell Gracie her secrets. Walter was never in the house, except for meals, he was shepherd on the estate and had a little lambing shed where he kept all the prize-cards he'd won at the agricultural shows with his Suffolk ewes, and he spent most of his time there with his prizes, she didn't know what he did there, long after it was dark. And when he came home he went straight to bed after supper and asleep before she'd washed the things up, never any love, like.

All the time Gracie was waiting for winter to make the flying field too muddy or icy for the planes to take off. She wanted a rest from the nightly vigil that began when she heard the engines splutter and roar and saw the flare path light up suddenly and the great dark vultures run forward and disappear into the night. And the long, long silence that went on and on till she thought the world must have grown exhausted with the endlessness of turning and turning, and at last the distant buzz that was like a child smiling in her, and the increasing drone and the great heavy shapes coming down in the haggard light. And he'd always wave to her window, and she'd turn to sleep then for an hour, before getting up to sweep the fagends and ash and dust out of the Naffy with queer thoughts in her light head. It was hard, going on and on. Only it was hard for him, too.

And all the time life got deeper and wider, deeper and wider than she had ever dreamed it could be; she was perpetually amazed at the inexhaustible wonder and gentleness of it. She got breathless, it was queer, as if she'd run a long way with him—she got short of breath just sitting and talking to him.

One evening when Walter was out in the lambing shed Millie stood looking at them a minute very seriously, and Gracie saw her exchange a glance with her lover, and she felt all a tremble. And she knew they'd been talking to some purpose. She half-guessed, and when Millie put a candle and a box of matches on the table and went out without a word, she knew for certain. And to save him getting embarrassed she stood up and lit the candle herself and took his hands.

He followed her upstairs and pushed open the bedroom door. Millie had shown him and he marvelled at Gracie being so cool and quiet and matter-of-fact. She put the candle on the washbasin and after a long pause turned quietly to his arms.

The pain and panic of that hour broke the dream in her. She had wanted to please him, that was the deepest thing she wanted, to please him by perpetuating and confirming the world their association had evoked, to make it flesh. But there was no pleasure in it, no love even, it was the ice in her, that which even then would not melt, a lump of ice blocking the stream. Sordidly sobbing on the ruffled quilt—she had removed her shoes to keep it clean—she wrestled with reality and unreality in a Jacob's dream. And he, so accomplished in this, whispered to her advice which she felt herself hating, hating. And then accepting, but as if she were accepting defeat. It would be alright in time, he murmured, kissing her, kissing her—*she would choke if he didn't let her go*—it was bound to be like that at first. Oh yes, he knew all about it, of course.

Yet whom did she hate? Not him, after all, but herself.

So the bread had become a stone, as the Bible said He had taken what she could neither give nor withhold. And he was disappointed in her, told her not to be hysterical and old-fashioned, said it kindly, but it was still an insult, Stiffened by it she sat up and combed her hair, dabbed her face with water and powder, tidied herself, said, Let's go, and could not meet his eyes that followed her every action. She couldn't face Millie either, waiting in the kitchen for them with the kettle boiling for cocoa, so she slipped out through the front door.

And gradually, by herself, she made terms with life, figuring out just how it was He had never said a word about the future. Marriage wasn't in his mind And how could it be when he didn't expect to live? She wasn't blaming him for that Their whole life was so limited in a way, limited to the aerodrome, its routine and conventions and personnel and operations When he went on leave in November she couldn't go with him even if he'd wanted to take her They were just part of the aerodrome, that was all, a little corner of the war And he was more a part of it than she He belonged to his kite, and was part of its crew. He talked of her engines and controls and guns with the intimate quietness of a lover When she came back with her fuselage riddled with flak he was sorry for her and proud of her airworthiness, keeping her nose doggedly for home, shaking the flak off her back and never faltering He'd been through a lot with her, and he knew every fixture and cylinder and mounting in her. She meant more to him than Gracie did. And she wasn't blaming him for that, either Nor for going off on the razz with the rest of the crew after a big flight and a dogfight back It was natural for him and she knew her only chance was to keep in her proper place in his life No, she

didn't blame him, but she couldn't help hating. Hating the war more than the danger, the continuance of the risk more than its ending, it would go on and on, just like that, and there would be no peace Only war

He did his best to comfort the distress she couldn't always conceal from him When one of the crew got the D.F.M. he took her to the private little dinner they had in town But she felt it was a special privilege, and his mates treated her with the quixotic respect due to a friend's mistress She was unhappy in the midst of their courtesy and merriment and wine, a raven at the feast.

Yet she wanted him avidly, she dried up without him, was parched and dry and demagnetised unless he came with her to Millie's and Walter was out in the lambing shed Millie was immensely maternal to them both, one day she'd have shot a rabbit for supper for them, another day the blind hen she kept in the coalshed would have laid them a couple of eggs And she'd talk to them as they ate the hot supper by her fire, telling them how she was terrified of the little brown deer that slipped noiselessly through the pinewoods and would attack her one night, she felt sure, or how she'd told Walter's mother to get out of her house when the old blighter accused her of giving Walter the toothache Gracie knew how Millie wanted to look after her, no matter what happened She was a melodramatic kind-hearted creature, Millie, and she was starving in herself

So she figured it out that she wouldn't risk more than she must And she felt herself shrinking and shrinking into something small and hard and cunning, her eyes grew puckered a little, as if with watching from a corner, watching his actions and mannerisms, his comings and goings, his free and easy

laughter, his dangerous journeys She saw him as his mates saw him, and as the girls in the Naffy saw him, and as Millie saw him And watching him moving through his life and his duty she waited for something to happen to him, some little incident in his life, some casual necessity of the war

The ground froze up in mid-December and he had a lot of time on his hands He used to sit in the Naffy for hours, reading the paper, playing doolies and dominoes, leaning on the counter when the rush hour was over, talking to Gracie behind the manageress's back, looking lethargic and preoccupied and browned-off She felt the same old resentment at him wanting to be action, with his mates and his kite in his fleece-lined jacket and straps The inaction got on her nerves as well

At the end of the second week he said "Let's go into town this afternoon, Gracie I want to do a bit of shopping and maybe your taste is better than mine by now I don't seem to know the difference between genuine things and sham any more Too much flying, most likely"

So she put her best Herschel costume on and her Dutch shoes and her black straw hat that turned up all round with her curly fringe in front of it, and she felt like new paint for once When they got off the bus he said "Let's go along the lake for a bit first The shops are too crowded They get on my nerves"

Walking along by the lake the sun came out and touched the willows on the island to red flames School-boys sailing boats and dragging butterfly nets for minnows to put in their jam-jars Soldiers and their girls strolling past A woman sitting knitting in the cold An old man with a beard, gathering herbs in brown paper Gracie let him lead her quietly to the copse of northern pines, where the wind was singing to itself

"Look, Gracie," he said, stopping and turning to her and kicking a stump of gorse with his toe "I've been thinking it out this week. Shall I tell you what I think?"

"Yes," she said, her whole life suddenly pausing. If after all it was just this Saturday afternoon beside the lake for which she had been waiting with such fixed frightened endurance?

"Well, I've been thinking about the kite and about the boys," he said.

Something flared up in her, blind anger, like a heath fire half-stamped-out that breaks again into flame with a gust of wind.

"Yes?" she said. "That's not unusual, is it?"

He didn't notice the spleen in her voice.

"You didn't see her come in from the last trip, did you?" he said. "She crash-landed. She had half the port wing shot away over Hamburg and the undercarriage was busted. And when we got out we found Micky in the rear-gunner's blister couldn't get out. So I went in after him. I told you he'd gone to hospital, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said.

There was no spleen in her now. She watched his face, he was looking across the choppy sun-flash of the lake, pulling his sight back from where his thoughts were, pulling it back towards her. She had a queer impression that he was in the plane, a speck in the clouds over the world, trying to bring her back to the landing field, the sleeping bunk, the breakfast and bath, Gracie's window—to the solid fixed point on the earth where the odd clues made a human reality and he was able to be something familiar and simple. He wanted to make the airport, and find it not the scientific centrifugal force that sent planes out like shuttles on a loom, but *home, his home*.

"Well, he died to-day," he said.

After kicking the stump of gorse for a long time he said "I can't forget the stunk of blood, and the clots of black flesh congealed in his clothes and the mess on the floor his face was sprawled in—I can't get it out of my mouth, Gracie, the filthy mess it was, and the stunk."

She could see Micky alright as he used to be in the station dances and the Naffy Always acting and telling stories that made the table listen and then burst out laughing—dirty stories, no doubt, but a good spirit in them—and suddenly getting up and doing an Egyptian dance with his wrists at right angles and his body a triangle and one arm stretched forward, the other to the rear Always calling the girls "Love" and never bothering with them *really* Turning out everything in his pockets onto the counter to find a couple of pennies to pay for his char, and a funny pocketful he usually had—marbles that he'd won from kids in the village, a locket, once even a dead bird Micky was a good name for him.

"Micky and I used to go on leave together," he said "And pool our wages when we were going on the razz. I sat his wireless exam for him because he had a hangover, and wrote his paper out with a sloping hand when I'd finished my own We had some times together"

"Yes," she said.

"Well," he said "It doesn't make sense, see, Gracie; but I didn't cotton on to what this war is, and what killing is, until I smelt that gore in Micky's cabin and saw him screwed up on the floor And I've been thinking—Well, Christ Almighty!" he turned and put his big hands on her shoulders—"Why didn't you tell me before, Gracie? Why didn't you make me see? *You* could see, couldn't you?"

"What, darling?"

"Well," he said. "I can't say it exactly. What I mean is, well, how *casual* we are, blokes like me, I mean. We don't realise what we're dragging in the muck, most of the time."

And she knew that this was her big moment, one way or the other something was going to break.

"I'd got used to the idea of dying," he said. (Why must he go on kicking that stump of gorse? Dust was curling up between the fine ice-film, over his toecap) "It's *living* is what puzzles me. I've fooled around all the time. It's a kind of habit I've got into."

She waited, her head bent down like a worn-out doll.

"I was thinking," he said, "what if I could make a start, now, it's a sort of opportunity, when the ground's frozen up and there's no chance of taking off for a week or two. What do you think?"

"You're a funny boy," was all she could say.

"So was Micky," he said. "But he's serious now." (The gorse broke at last. He stopped kicking) "Well, I was thinking of proposing to you, Gracie, see?"

She didn't answer.

"Will you take a chance with me?" he said, his hands hurting her.

"Haven't I taken one with you already?" she said.

His lips stroked her fringe, he took her round little hat off.

"Oh, look!" he said. "Look at those two swans."

A brace of swans, swift and white, cut like arrows slantwise through the lemon clouds of misty sunlight over the pines, wings firm-spread and glittering white in their downrushing and furling, scarcely disturbing the surface of the lake.

"Perfect landing!" he said. "Wasn't it? Couldn't have done better myself."

DUSTY HERMITAGE

SHE had had the key of his cottage ever since his death, and at least once a week she had gone in and dusted it, opened the window, put fresh flowers in the music room, and run the brown water out of the taps. She did this for three years, and when his brother or mother or friends were coming down they dropped her a line and she got everything ready for them—coal and firewood, milk and bread and groceries, also she asked the butcher boy to call for orders, the butcher boy who was waltzing on his bicycle across the heath when the great Brough Superior roared round the bend flat out, and swerved to avoid him, and threw its rider, and killed the owner of the cottage just like that. She didn't worry about the future of the cottage as long as his family lived, she knew they wouldn't sell it, besides nobody would want to live in that arid twilight stretch of dusty rhododendrons and scrub and tank lanes, except perhaps an officer from the R.A.C. camp. But she didn't want it to fall back into the uninhabited decay in which he had found it. So that when the National Trust took the cottage under their aegis and converted it into a museum, she admitted to herself that it was perhaps the best solution, even though it was incongruous that the dusty little hermitage should be given the official status of a "Place of Historic Interest." And when they asked her, very deferentially and respectfully, whether she would still keep the key and let people in and tend the place,

she being the only person living within a mile of it, she said Yes, of course

And for four years she showed people round the cottage. Sometimes she listened to their remarks, sometimes she shut her ears. Their comments built up such a vulgar grotesque image of him; an inflated public figure, a national hero, a great man, a human paradox, a Jekyll and Hyde, a mixture of a glamorous desert sheikh out of *Desert Song* and a boorish solitary playing pseudonymous games. When the visitors gossiped in that way she didn't listen, unless the effect of their words cast its cheap neon light not on him but on themselves and she saw how their minds were full of headlines and sensations and Hollywood hungers. It amused her to listen to them then. Particularly if it was somebody "great", a general glittering with polished jackboots and Sam Browne and red epaulettes and drooping moustaches, or a Cabinet Minister with his wife and chauffeur, or some long-haired person with a big velvet bow-tie. How hungrily they looked round for the Visitors' Book, sometimes even asking her if there was one, and how they were irritated or disappointed when she said "No, there's no Visitors' Book I'm afraid"—as though they particularly wanted *him* to know they *had* called. What a pleasant relief it was when his mother came down, or one of his delightful friends, and they talked together for the afternoon, quite different, *quite different*.

Fewer people came down since the war, and now that private cars had all been laid up scarcely anybody came at all. A few soldiers from the camp, an occasional hiker or cyclist, that was all. She was by herself once more, with her flowers and vegetables and hens and kittens, which was as she liked it.

On June 13th, the anniversary of his death, she preferred

nobody to call for the key. She performed the same orderly little ritual each year. In the morning before breakfast she cut her best late roses, some sweet peas and carnations and antirrhinums and a few tall yellow hollyhocks, and filled the flower bowls in his dark low-ceilinged library downstairs and the beautiful moss-coloured music room upstairs. She opened all the windows and left it all so. At four in the afternoon she shut the windows. The bike had thrown him just then.

This year somebody called in the middle of the afternoon. As a matter of fact she was lancing a little sac of pus that had been making the tabby kitten limp for the last few days, and when the bell rang she deliberately didn't answer it until she had unhurriedly finished the operation. Then she opened the door and it was as she feared, a middle-aged man and his wife wanting the key. She looked at her watch. It was half-past three. She said she'd come with them directly, wanting to get them out of the way by four. And she went straight down the lane, not even taking her pinafore off.

She opened the door and gave them one of the green brochures for threepence each and they stood in the library looking at the outside of the brochures and at all the photographs at the same time. The big divan with its worn leather coverlet and his sleeping bag so filled the room that the visitors had difficulty in moving. And they were both of a middle-aged corpulence, he in his black suit and celluloid collar chafing his chins and she in her flouncing summer frock with diaphanous frills camouflaging her bulges. They must have walked up from the station, they looked hot and dusty; the wife fanned herself with a *Daily Mirror* and looked longingly at the divan, they were going to have a rest. She'd be lucky if she got them out by four.

"This is a small place for a great man," the husband said, wiping his forehead along the line of his hatbrim with a large damp handkerchief. "You can't swing a cat here." He blew hot air out of his cheeks with a puff like a bicycle valve. "But then, I gather he wasn't very strong on the financial side, was he?" He looked without interest at a photograph of excavations at Carchemish. "Funny, too I believe his book was a best seller, wasn't it? *Somebody* must have got the money."

She stood in the shadows by the door, her back against the wall, very slender and straight and quiet, her grey hair fastened neatly in a small bun above her long neck, effacing herself. It wasn't quite clear whether the husband was speaking to his wife or to her, or just to an audience. She imagined the latter and made no reply.

"I wouldn't like to live here, anyway," the wife said. She looked round. "There isn't even an indoor lavatory, is there?"

She heard the gate click, and the sound of boots on the gravel, army boots by the sound of it. *Somebody* else.

She didn't move from the shadow just inside the door. Then the light from the open hall door was obscured by the newcomer. It was a low door and his head must have nearly touched the lintel. He was wiping his boots on the mat. How unusually considerate.

She turned to face him. He was in battledress, with the red and yellow flash of the Armoured Corps on his arm, one pip on his shoulder, motoring goggles round his neck, and his black beret in his hand. He looked young and wiry, with wide perceptive eyes that were more contemplative and sensitive than inquisitive.

She knew she had seen his face before. Still, that was not in itself uncommon among visitors to the cottage.

"Good afternoon," he said. "May I come in?"

"Of course," she replied, automatically picking up a brochure and handing it to him. Contacts with people sometimes embarrassed her, so that she went through the formalities of introduction, or as in this case, the threepenny entrance fee, without being consciously aware of it. She only regained her serenity when he turned from her to look at the photographs and the portraits by Kennington and John that lined the library shelves. She had not moved. The married couple were sitting empirically on the edge of the divan in front of the portraits.

"What a marvellous face," the woman said, fanning herself. "Isn't it a *shame* he had to die like that? You'd think he'd have been more careful, wouldn't you? And he'd have been so useful to us in *this* war, too."

"They say he didn't care," her husband replied. "He was cheezed off with things. He was a miserable sort of chap." He turned to the door, looking at the shadow there. "Did you know him?" he asked.

She nodded. Yes in the shadow.

"Was he?" he asked with the directness of a man who expects his employees to have it at their fingertips.

"Not with me," she said. "He was different with different people."

The soldier looked round at her a moment, quickly.

"Did he smoke?" the wife said.

"Would you mind if I had a look upstairs?" the soldier asked her.

"Of course not," she said. "I'll come with you."

As they were going up the stairs they heard the man say he was going outside to have a pipe while she finished looking at the "snaps."

Upstairs, as down, there were only two rooms. A small guest room on the right with a sleeping bag marked "Thine" and a water cistern, and the spacious, tranquil "music room" on the left with its cool mossy carpet and soft leather door like an Arab's temporary habitation.

"He made the door himself," she said "Listen" She let it swing closed "It doesn't make a sound He made that Jacobean chest, too, when he was a boy He was ill"

"It's good carving," he said, considering the formal entwining of grapes and leaves.

"He didn't like it," she said. "But of course he never liked his own work He said it was never *innocent*." She shrugged her shoulders.

"He was an artist," the soldier said slowly, looking out through the window onto the dusty thicket of rhododendrons „But an artist who couldn't commit himself to his choice."

"How do you mean?" she asked, swinging the door to again, soundlessly

"Well, the artist has the best chance of pursuing the good," he said, "because as an artist he has no vested interests in the warring elements He is just so much an artist as he is disinterested. But that is only his potential His actual power depends on the vigour with which he pursues his choice once he has made it He couldn't make a positive choice. That's why he was unfulfilled"

"You have chosen?" she said, smiling a trifle ironically.

"In so far as one can," he said, laughing a little and standing up. "My trouble is ——" and he laughed again, evading her without being evasive That was a habit she had met before also "Oh well, we grow up by the time we die. One learns self-respect after learning to respect other things. It's just the

order in which things happen that puts you all wrong."

"Do you think she really knew him?" a voice came from the gravel path. "An ordinary woman like that?"

"Hush," the husband said. "Your voice is too loud"

"I suppose he borrowed milk from her, and a loaf of bread sometimes," she continued. "I meant to ask her, was he a *sight* after his accident? Oh well, never mind now. I didn't think much of the place, did you? I mean, not all that long walk."

Their voices faded away, dusty as the road

"I always kept some milk on one side for him," she said. "And a little wholemeal loaf. She's quite right."

"Heavens," the soldier said, looking at his watch. "It's five to four. I've got a tank trial at four in the camp. I'll have to fly"

"Have you got a bicycle?" she asked.

"Better still," he said. "I've got a motorbike."

Something jumped inside her, like a dark fist. She trembled, stilled herself, and tossed her head.

"I apologise for poking my nose into another man's house like this," he said. "I won't intrude again"

She smiled. "Few people say that," she said. "Most of them are only too glad to." She held the door open for him.

"Yes," he said, looking at her. "But few houses have such a living presence in them."

She returned his look.

"You feel that about this place?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, still looking at her. "You ought to be proud of that, you know."

He smiled and slipped past her. He turned at the bottom of the stairs.

"Good-bye," he said, waving his beret and smiling

"Good-bye," she waved back

She followed him downstairs and watched him set the controls of his motor-bike.

Before the engine made speech impossible with its roar, she called out to him

He turned his head towards her

"Be careful on that motor-bike," she said "The road is still only where he was killed The tanks cross it there Be *careful*."

"Yes," he said, laughing back, fresh and suddenly carefree "Good-bye."

The engine roared at his kick He revved her up, put her in gear, let the clutch out He was gone with a whirl of dust She looked at her watch It was four o'clock

She knew she wouldn't see him again But she was inexplicably happy despite her unreasoning agitation as the sound of the motor-bike died away. And quietly she turned back to the empty cottage to close the windows Another such as he had come and gone

She was remembering his last letters "I find myself wishing all the time that my own curtain would fall. There is something broken . my will, I think . As for fame after death, it's a thing to spit at, the only minds worth winning are the warm ones about us If we miss those we are failures." And how some evenings he watered her flowers

THE PRISONERS

THE wooden blinds black-out the light hanging over the card game. The military police loosen the necks of their battle-dress and flick their cards onto the stained baize, and salivate as they wait for supper. In the next room, behind the locked door, the prisoners lie on their straw palliasses, easily and uneasily, looking for sleep in the darkness. .

In the morning, when the sun shone, the prisoners marched back and forth in threes along the path of dusty earth fenced with barbed wire. Back and forth, back and forth, about turn, about turn under the police corporal's whipped commands, exercising themselves as the Medical Officer instructed. Their blankets, neatly folded on groundsheets, lay in the sun, square piles of grey and blue beneath the trees. The trees towered in new leaf, two chestnuts waking to summer, green palaces of sighing down-hanging leaves momentarily exhausted with burgeoning. Maybe the prisoners noticed this morning that there was less sunlight patching the dusty compound, the green leaves have been sucking the sun, reaching forth their fine fingers and folding the sunlight away.

Being Sunday, the prisoners sang hymns after their exercise. The padre only asked them to sing hymns on Sunday, visiting them after the big church parade and putting a hymn on their silent tongues, giving them a nice change.

And after the hymns and the benediction the prisoners

cleaned the buckets that had been filled with water overnight and left to rust through their sleep. And after dinner the browned-off corporal marched them down the dusty road through the camp area to scrub the company offices and quartermasters' stores, the latrine seats and ablution rooms, and the back stairs of the officers' mess. When they had done, he marched them to the tin shanty where the cold showers were, and made each man bath himself while he leaned against the zinc sheeting and spat thoughtfully and scratched his chest and his neck.

Then back for tea, which was brought up in deep tin boxes, bread, cake, a tin of jam, a pail of tea. The corporal kept the tea waiting till its cheering warmth had taken a chill—it was a favourite gag of his.

And then, after tea, for a whole beautiful hour, the prisoners were free to do exactly what they liked, bar smoking. They could write a letter—though not more than one—to whom they chose, or they could read the yellow Westerns the padre had brought them from Woolworths. Or they could lie on their palliasses and talk. They could do just as they pleased, in fact.

Then lights out at dusk, black-out up, no talking allowed. The thin partition and the ill-fitting door through which the light streaked allowed every sound to pass. So there was silence, then whispers in the silence, and the uneasy movement of lethargic bodies. In the police room the sound of talk, obscene talk, polishing and tidying, the corporal of the day going out for a booze, the corporal of the night taking over. He was a decent chap, the night bloke, he let the prisoners talk themselves to sleep, and if they had threepence he'd sell them a Woodbine.

"Thank God that bastard's gone," said a rough voice in the

darkness of the prisoners' room, sighing with relief as the day corporal slammed the door behind him and hurried down the road. "I'll get that bastard stone cold once I get back to civvy street."

It is a psychological characteristic of soldiers with a grudge, this revenge vow they link up with a return to equality.

"That won't be to-morrow, Nicky, so don't promise yerself nothink, yer might ferget abaht 'im by then," a cracked Cockney voice from the corner replied.

"Not me I won't," the rough voice shot back "I don't forget no faces, boy"—this with a smear of pride—"when I started work in the lamproom in Durham pits at fourteen I knew every man's face and where 'is lamp was within a fortnight No need to look at their number plates, knew three 'undred faces I did"

"Aw, shurrup," the cockney retorted "If you're such a bleeding miracle 'ow come you're in 'ere doin' a bit of time?"

"Got to pay for yer pleasures, Tommy, that's fair enough. How was I to know it was the OC's car I was spooning in? 'E should 'a locked the door of it, the dozey cow"

They were quite at ease in detention, these two Nobody did more than twenty-eight days in the camp jail Longer punishments were served in the glass-house at Aldershot These two had just settled down to a month's clink. They weren't missing much The old cockney was nearing his discharge, actually waiting his final medical board He had fought the last war out to the bitter end; this time he wasn't bothering. His job was to polish the officers' brown boots and belts and stoke the boilers. He was proud of his record, no convictions for anything except his solitary failing, drunkenness. He was a bit ashamed of that; not of being hauled before the C.O regularly,

but of finding himself less and less able to hold his beer. His head was as weak as his bladder and he was seriously perturbed at this softening of his most valued faculties. He was garrulous with a touch of senility, and boastful and crammed with violent exploits. He had killed men in France, in Flanders, in Asia Minor, after the war he had killed men in Egypt and Russia, it never seemed to have occurred to him that he himself ought to have been killed by any reasonable law of averages, consequently, he related his bloody stories and pranks impersonally, ironically, like a laughing malicious daemon.

The Durham boy was a young conscript, one for the flesh-pots, with a long lean face and a squat body, strong and agile, a monkey of a lad. He took things as they came. He was at home anywhere, simple and genuine, carrying no regrets in his mind to veil or give pause to his zest. His company commander had found him spooning in the back of his car outside the town hall a week back, and had taken a humourless view of the matter. "Serve 'im right if 'e can't take a joke," Nicky had muttered to the girl he was with, quietly putting the O.C. also on his revenge sheet for civvy street.

There were two other men lying in the darkness. One had been there for a fortnight, waiting trial. He was in for a packet, he was Kong was his nickname, a heavy retarded man with a thick corrugated forehead receding to curly hair, a flat nose, a fat little mouth with lips like cherries, and a hairy ape-like body, bandy with heavy labour.

He never grinned, never did anything spontaneous, before speaking he always shifted his body, raised his shoulders, lifted his head up on his short bullneck—and then he said something slowly, brooding on his words. He never drank or went to town on Saturdays or read—maybe he couldn't read,

he had no curiosity about the war, and no physical fear, for he had stood and watched an odd plane dive-bomb the working party he was with the August after Dunkirk and it seemed to have amazed him in a slow wondering way. Six men had been killed and he was so impressed that he never said a word. He was as ingenuous and gullible as any cockney could have wished, if anyone advised him to do a thing he did it. He followed people like a child, every day, in every detail—to meals, to draw kit, to parades, to bed. Generally his mates looked after him and quickly shut up any smart alick who tried to make a guy of him. But this time he was in one hell of a mess. He'd hit a policeman with a blunt poker, and they were waiting to see whether the policeman would recover. When he was out of hearing, Tommy would immediately start thinking aloud about the policeman, wondering whether he'd fractured his skull, asking the corporal of the guard every day whether any news had come from the hospital, watching and listening at the keyhole every time anyone came into the guard room in case they had news. With a taste for violence and drama he half-hoped the policeman would die. All *his* murders had been legal and authoritative. He had never slept with a real murderer before. In a way it would be interesting. And when Kong was in a docile innocent mood, after tea when they had a spare hour sometimes, he would try artfully to make him talk about how it happened. So far in vain.

"Sleeping, Kong?" Tommy asked, reaching over and prodding the heavy silent body.

"Naow," Kong grunted. As a matter of fact he scarcely slept at all.

"Didn't 'ave enough food," Tommy said sympathetically. "They don't never give us a man's rations in 'ere, think

because we're indoors we don't get 'ungry, I s'pose. Blimey, they ought to know our bellies get bigger and bigger in jail. There ain't much else to think of"

Nobody joined in. They were all fed up with his moaning about food. As it was he always tried to serve out the dinner so that he could give himself more than the others.

"Sociable lot," he grunted. "Reel chatty. Like to meet you lads in the old boozer in Kentish Town after the war. 'Ave some fun together, w'at do you think?" Silence, then, imperceptibly—"When I was in 'ospital in Newport wiv a blighty in the last do, that's w'en I 'ad the food. I was a 'ero then, of course. Ladies bringing me chocluts an' jelly an' custard every artemnoon. Coo! An' I stayed there eight months, boy, long arter my leg'd got better. There was a sister in my ward, see, an' I seducced 'er you might say, an' she didn't 'alf like it. So she moved me into a private ward and always gave me a temperature so's the MO couldn't send me out, an' many a merry night she warmed my bed for me. But the food, Lumme!"

Still nobody spoke. He sighed sorrowfully and turned over. "Luvly, tell yer mam," he concluded, yawning and spitting against the wall.

Somebody came into the guardroom and warned the NCO. that there was an air raid message purple on. Later, five or ten minutes, and the first distant tremor touched their ears. Then slowly, beautifully, the air began throbbing, growing wider and deeper, a vibrant dynamic throb that touched their veins and bodies where they lay in their scruffy blankets, touched them like a drop of brandy, sensitising and liberating their imprisoned bodies so that they were part of the throbbing air, the pulsing night, the feeling slender searchlights, the vast dangerous purpose and counter-purpose of the war.

"Santa Claus," sneered Tommy, "takin' a present for my missus in Kentish Town, bless 'er 'eart Jerry ain't concerned over us We're only soljers"

A distant muffled thud, the door rattled

"Pompey," said Tommy "Green-grocer's on the corner. Wumph Wumph" The other three lay listening, very still and relaxed

"Taint nothing," he said deprecatingly. "We ain't 'ad nothing yet. Not to the last time. It's Russia wor's getting it this-time All the Bolshies I reckon a man wor stays a Bolshie after 'e's eighteen ought to be *forced* to work. I was there last time, and I know wor I seen. I was there in the Rasputin do, boy I seen the soldiers coming back from the front an' the women coming out of the brothels Alright, too Alright"

"Aw, shut your long trap," Nicky shouted, suddenly angry "Shut your trap and let's 'ave some peace I want to sleep."

"Aw awright, Geordie, 'ave yer bleeding sleep"

Humming Esquimaux Nell, Tommy slowly and easily glided into sleep

For half an hour flak and bombs and naval guns thundered and rattled thirty miles south of them, on the coast Then the night closed its eyes again.

The darkness of the prison room grew fuggy with the snoring breath of the sleepers Next door was quiet, except for the murmured words of the card game The light lay like a bright yellow rapier across the dark room and the scrubbed floor Apathy swirled slowly about and about, like stale tobacco smoke, nothing seemed to be happening in the silent downpressing four-walled darkness, nothing, no conscious thought, no human qualm of hope or faith or fear, apathy like a stale

drain wandering stagnantly through all attrition, through all the land Through darkness and windows of darkness, through the slums and the promenades of the night, merging and dissolving all effort and identity and resolve The prisoners turned uneasily

A heavy hairy hand ruggd the sleeping blankets Kong couldn't sleep Perhaps he was having a living nightmare and needed desperately some human help He ruggd the blankets of the boy next to him, the fourth of the prisoners He was a newcomer, not interesting to Tommy because he spoke like a clerk, with a quiet gentleness that was mammy's boy to Tommy, too civil he was He had only been in two days, he was doing a seven days' stretch for absence without leave, Tommy disliked him further because he wouldn't tell them why he'd done a bunk, politely he evaded all leading questions. And he only needed to shave every three days, soft downy skin he had like a girl's, and brown eyes so liquid and sensitive you couldn't look at them in case you hurt him, little cissie

"Sleeping, mate?" Kong whispered hoarsely

"No," the boy answered quietly.

"Nor me," Kong assured him, his voice swimming with relief, "I i'n't sleeping, neither"

"I can't feel tired, somehow," the boy said

"Let's talk, is it?" Kong asked with the wishful timid voice of a child

"Yes," the boy replied "If you can think of anything to say. I can't think"

"You don't like it in 'ere, mate, do you?" Kong said

"No," said the boy

Kong listened like an animal; he could hear the boy weeping, he could hear the tears running down his cheeks, the slight

swallowing noises he was making trying to control his tear ducts

Kong waited patiently until he felt the boy compose himself. Then he spoke slowly, half to himself

"They're always asking you what you're in jail for, same as me I don't tell them what 'appened, see? I'm not arstin' you, neither "

The boy was silent

"I'll tell you what it was with me, though," Kong said, speaking easily, miraculously confessing "I won't tell the judge nor nobody. Only I'll tell you to-night My missus, see? She's only eighteen Well, my mother, she wrote to me. She said my missus was 'aving a man in every night, in the dark, see?"

He waited a little

"Yes," the boy said softly

"Well, my mate, see, 'e read the letter to me Then 'e thought it out, and arsked the sarge, an' sarge said tell the OC about it The OC will stop 'er allowance, sarge said, and I'll get full pay, not ten bob like I'm getting now See?"

"Yes," the boy breathed

"But I went 'ome myself, walked it I did Only I didn't want to get there at night I wanted to get there at dinner time, and 'ave dinner with 'er There'd be nobody there then I thought But there was a policeman on the corner, knew my name and number, 'e did Said 'e 'ad orders to arrest me and send me back Without me seein' 'er, see?"

"An' 'e tried to stop me.

"But 'e didn't stop me

"She said it was all lies, so I don't care now.

"If 'e dies I don't care"

"He won't die," the boy said.

"You don't think 'e'll die?"

"No, he won't die," the boy said, praying.

"I don't care," Kong said.

He lay quietly for a time.

"I went away to see my girl, too," the boy said

"Did you see her?" Kong asked eagerly.

"Yes"

"Good kid," Kong relaxed, happy.

"My sister've got a baby," Kong said "W'en it was one year old its 'air turned from yellow to brown it did It was all bones at first, she wouldn't let me touch it, little thing But it got fat an' strong and laughing and kicking"

"My sister's got two children," the boy said "Denis and Maureen They wear green rompers and yellow bonnets, like daffodils."

Kong turned over

"Are you going to sleep?" he asked

"Yes, now," the boy said

"It must be late," Kong said "I don't care"

The night composed itself again.

Kong lay very still, too still to be sleeping

The boy knew this, and didn't get up as he wanted to, and walk round He lay still, thinking of his girl and his home and his father's anger because he had deserted, the scene on the lawn in front of the library windows, and kissing her good-bye, oh his heart breaking in him, and the Army again, the Army, the Army Which was the way to the front to fight, to fight and be killed? This way? He was afraid of going this way, a deserter sent abroad in punishment he loathed being killed this way .

The white of his cheeks turns pallid as the fine ashes of dawn fall grey on his skin, all his vain barricades waver as the

grey tide strokes his delicate head and its passionate error.

Dawn is rough against the outer wall

The cards fall softly in weak pools of light.

But the four prisoners tremble and turn uneasily, and smile
in their sleep in the darkness, unknowingly, beautiful as
children

Dawn is distant, distant as the origin of the smile on their
sleeping lips.

The bugler also sleeps.

THEY CAME

THE evening was slowly curdling the sky as the soldier trudged the last mile along the lane leading from the station to the Hampshire village where he was billeted. The hedgerows drew together in the dusk and the distance, bending their waving heads to each other as the fawn bird and the black bird sang among the green hollies. The village lay merged in the soft seaward slope of the South Downs, the soldier shifted his rifle from left to right shoulder and rubbed his matted eyelashes with his knuckles. He was a young chap but, hampered by his heavy greatcoat and equipment, he dragged his legs like an old clerk going home late. He cleared his throat of all that the train journey, cigarettes and chocolate and tea and waiting had secreted in his mouth. He spat the thick saliva out. It hung on a twig.

Someone was following him. When he heard the footsteps first he had hurried, annoyed by the interfering sound. But his kit was too clumsy to hurry in and he was too tired. So he dawdled, giving his pursuer a chance to pass him. But the footsteps stayed behind, keeping a mocking interval. He couldn't stop himself listening to them, but he refused to look back. He became slowly angry with himself for letting them occupy his mind and possess his attention. After a while they seemed to come trotting out of the past in him, out of the Welsh mining village, the colliers gambling in the quarry, the county school

where he learned of sex and of knowledge, and college where he had sworted and slacked in poverty, and boozed, and quarreled in love. They were the footsteps of the heavy-jawed deacon of Zion, with his white grocer's apron and his hairy nostrils sniffing out corruption.

But that was silly, he knew. Too tired to control his mind, that's what it was. These footsteps were natural and English, the postman's perhaps . . . But still they followed him, and the dark gods wrestling in him in the mining valley pricked their goaty ears at the sound of the pinking feet.

He turned the corner into the village and went down the narrow street past the post office and the smithy, turned the corner under the A.A. sign and crossed the cobbled yard of the hotel where the officers' and business men's cars were parked. A shaggy old dog came frisking out of its strawfilled barrel in the corner, jumping and barking. He spoke to it and at once it grovelled on its belly. He always played with the dog in the mornings, between parades. The unit did its squad drill in the hotel yard, kitchen maids watching flirtatiously through the windows, giggling, and the lavatory smelling either of disinfectant or urine.

He pushed open the little door in the big sliding doors of the garage which had been converted into a barrack room for the duration. Thin electric bulbs high in the cold roof dangled a weak light from the end of the twisted, wavering flex. Grey blankets folded over biscuits or straw palliasses down both sides of the room. Equipment hanging from nails on the white-washed wall—in one corner a crucifix, over the thin, chaste, taciturn Irish boy's bed. He was the only one in the room, sitting on his bed in the cold dark corner writing in his diary. He looked up and smiled politely, self-effacingly, said "Hallo

Had a good leave?" and bent his narrow head again to read what he had written.

"Yes, thanks," said the soldier, "except for raids. The first night I was home he raided us for three hours, the sod," he said, unbuckling his bayonet belt and slipping his whole kit off his shoulders.

Last time he returned from leave, four months back, he had sat down on his bed and written to his wife. They had married on the first day of that leave and slept together for six nights. This time he didn't ferret in his kitbag for notepaper and pencil. He went straight out.

The hotel management had set a room aside for the soldiers to booze in. It was a good class hotel, richly and vulgarly furnished with plush and mirrors and dwarf palms in green boxes. The auctioneers and lawyers and city men, the fishermen and golfers and bank managers, most of whom had weekend cottages or villas of retirement in commanding positions at the local beauty spots, spent the evening in the saloon bar and lounge, soaking and joking. So the soldiers were given a bare little bar parlour at the back, with a fire and a dartboard and two sawdust spittoons. The soldiers were glad of it. It was their own. They invited some of their pals from the village to play darts with them—the cobbler, the old dad who lived by himself in the church cottage and never shaved or washed, the poacher who brought them a plucked pheasant under his old coat sometimes—all the ones the soldiers liked popped in for an evening. A few girls, too, before the dance in the church hall, on Tuesdays.

Fred Garstang, from Porthmouth, and Ben Bryant, from Coventry, the two oldest soldiers in the unit—regulars who had never earned a stripe—were playing darts, two empty pint

glasses on the mantelpiece by the chalk and duster.

"'Owdee, Taffy?" they said in unison. "Ave a good leave, lad?"

"Yes thanks," he said automatically, "except for raids. The sod raided us for three hours the first night I was home."

"Damn. Just the wrong side of it," said Fred, examining the quivering dart "I deserve to lose this boody game, Ben. I 'xpect you're same as me, Taff, glad to get back to a bit of peace and quiet and a good sleep. My seven days in Pompey's the worst I've ever spent in India, China, the Rhineland, Gallygurchy or anywhere. But we're nice and cosy here, thank God. They can keep their leave. I don't want seven nights in an Anderson. Id' rather stay here, I would."

Old Fred never stopped talking once he started. The soldier tapped the counter with a shilling and leaned over to see whether the barmaid was on the other side of the partition. He saw her silky legs and the flutter of her skirt. He hit the counter harder, then, while he waited, wondered at his impatience. His body wasn't thirsty, it was too damned tired to bother, too worn-out. It was something else in him that wanted to get drunk, dead, dead drunk.

The barmaid came along, smiling. She was natural with the soldiers. She smiled when she saw who it was and held her pretty clenched fist to him across the counter. He should have taken it and forced it gently open, of course. Instead, he just put his flat palm underneath it. She looked at him with a hurt-faun reproach in her sailing eyes, and opening her hand let a toffee fall into his.

"One from the wood, Madge," he said.

"I'll have to charge you for *that*," she said.

"That's all right," he replied. "You always pay in this life."

"Why don't you take the girl, Taffy?" said old Fred as he came and sat by them, their darts over "If I was your age ——"

He had been in the army since he was fifteen. Now he was past soldiering, wandering in the head sometimes, doing odd jobs, in peace-time he kept the lawns trimmed at the depot, now he was tin-man in the cooking-shed, cleaning with Vim the pots and pans Ben Bryant used for cooking. "Vermicelli tastes all right," he said "Better than anything you can pick up in the streets Yellow or black or white, German or Irish. I've never had a Russian though, never. It's not bad when you're young, like a new crane when the jib runs out nice and smooth, it's better than sitting in the trenches like an old monkey, scratching yourself and not knowing whose leg it is or whose arm it is, looking in his pockets to see if there's anything worth taking, and not knowing who'll win the race, the bullet with your number on it or the leaky rod you're nursing But I like it here It's nice and peaceful up here, in the cookhouse all day. We ought to try some vermicelli, Ben, one day"

"Don't you get impatient now, Freddy," Ben said with the calmness of a father of many children "We'll stuff your pillow full of it next Christmas and put a sprig of it on your chest Don't you worry, boy"

But old Fred went on talking like an old prophet in a volcanic world, about and about "There's no knowing when you've got to fight for your king and country," he said „No matter who you are, Russian or Frenchy or Jerry—and the Yankee, too He'll be in it, boy I've seen him die It's only natural, to my way of thinking. I wore a pair of gloves the Queen knitted herself, she did, last time The Unknown Soldier I was, last time"

None of us are ourselves now, the Welsh boy sat thinking: neither what we were, nor what we will be. He drained his pint glass and crossed to the counter, to Madge smiling there.

"You never looked round all the way up from the station," she said, pulling her shoulder-straps up under her grey jumper and exposing the white rich flesh above her breasts.

"So it was you followed me, eh?" he said, sardonic.

"Why didn't you turn round?" she asked. "Did you know it was me? You knew someone was behind you, I could tell."

"I didn't turn round because I didn't want to look *back*," he said.

"And you mean to say you don't know how the Hebrew puts out the eyes of a goldfinch?" Freddy's aggrieved voice swirled up.

"Afraid of being homesick for your wife, eh?" she jeered.

He covered his eyes with his hand, tired out, and looked up at the vague sensual woman playing upon his instincts there like a gipsy on a zither.

"Not homesick," he said drily "Death-sick."

"What d'you mean?" she said.

"Well, she was killed in a raid," he shouted.

He went up to the orderly room then, having forgotten to hand in his leave pass to the orderly corporal. The room was in the corner of an old warehouse. The building also housed the kitchen and the quartermaster's stores. About the high bare rooms with their rotten dry floors and musty walls rats galloped in the darkness, in the morning their dirt lay fresh on the mildewed sacks and the unit's cat stretched her white paws and got a weak and lazy thrill from sniffing it.

The orderly corporal was dozing over a Western novelette

from Woolworth's, hunched up in a pool of lamp-and-fire-light.

"Hallo, Taffy," he said. "Had a good leave?"

"Yes thanks," he replied. "Except for raids. Am I on duty to-morrow?"

"You're on duty to-night, I'm afraid," the orderly corporal replied with the unctuous mock-regret of one who enjoys detailing tired or refractory men for unexpected jobs. "Dave Finley had a cold on his chest this morning and didn't get out of bed. So they fetched him out on a stretcher and the M O gave him pneumonia pills before Dave could stop him; so he's got pneumonia now. You'll go on guard at midnight and at six hours"

"OK"

He turned to go

"Better get some sleep," said the orderly corporal, yawning noisily. "Hell! I'm browned off with this war"

The soldier yawned too, and laughed, and returned to the barrack room to lie down for a couple of hours. He rolled his blankets down on the floor and stretched out.

Old Ben and Fred were back, also, Ben fixing bachelor buttons into his best trousers and singing Nelly Dean comfortably to himself, Fred muttering by the stove. "There's some mean and hungry lads in this room," he said; "very hungry and mean. It's an awful nature, that. They'll borrow off you all right, but they won't lend you the turd off their soles. And always swanking in the mirror, and talking all the time, saying Yes, they can do the job easy. The fools! Whip 'em! Whip 'em!"

Ben was toasting bread on the point of his bayonet and boiling water in his billy. A tin of pilchards left over from tea was for them all.

"Come on, Taffy. Have a bellyful while you can," he said.

"No thanks," said the soldier, restless on his blankets. "I don't feel like food to-night, Ben, thanks"

"Ain't you never bin hungry?" Fred shouted angrily. "You dont know what food is, you youngsters don't."

"I've been without food," the soldier said, thinking of the '26 strike; and going without peas and chips in the chip shop by the town clock in college when a new book must be bought. But not now, when everything is free but freedom, and the doctor and dentist and cobbler send you no bills

What survives I don't know, the soldier thought, rubbing his hot eyelids and shifting his legs on the spread-out blankets
What is it that survives?

He got up and buckled his battle ordet together, adjusting his straps, slipping the pull-through through his Enfield, polishing boots and buttons, tightening his helmet strap under his chin.

"There was a religious woman used to come to our house," Ben was saying, "and one day she said to me, sociable like, 'You're a Guinness drinker, aren't you, Mr Bryant?' and I says 'I am, mum,' and she says 'Well, can you tell me what's wrong with the ostrich on them advertisements?'"

The soldier went out to relieve the guard

They were only twenty soldiers altogether, sent up here to guard a transmitting station hidden in the slopes of the Downs A cushy job, safe as houses There was a little stone shed, once used for sheep that were sick after lambing, in a chalky hollow on the forehead of the hill, which the guard used for sleeping in when they were off duty Two hours on, four hours off, rain and sun and snow and stars As the soldier toiled up the lane and across the high meadow to the shed,

the milky moon came out from grey clouds and touched with lucid fingers the chopped branches piled in precise lengths at the foot of the wood. The pine trees moved softly as the moon touched their grey-green leaves, giving them a veil that looked like rainy snow, grey-white.

The lane running up through the wood shortened alarmingly in perspective. A star fell. So surprising, so swift and delicate, the sudden short curved fall and extinction of the tiny lit world. But over it the Plough still stayed, like something imperishable in man. He leant against the gate, dizzy and light-headed, waves of soft heat running into his head. He swallowed something warm and thick, spitting it out, he saw it was blood. He stayed there a little, resting, and then went on.

He went along the sandy lane, noticing as he always did the antique sculptures of sea and ice and rain, the smooth twisted flints, yellow and blue and mortled, lying in the white sand down which the water of winter scooped its way.

At the top of the lane was the lambing shed—guard room. He slipped quickly through the door to prevent any light escaping. There was gun-fire and the sound of bombs along the coast.

The sergeant of the guard was lying on a palliasse in front of the stove. He got up slowly, groaning lazily. "So you're back again, Taffy, are you?" he said, a grudge in his too hearty welcome. "Relieving Dave Finley, eh? He's swinging the lead, Dave is. I've a good mind to report him to the O.C. It's tough on you, going on night guard after a day's journey. Have a good leave, Taff?"

"Not bad," the soldier replied, "except for the raids. Raided us the first night I was home."

"It's a sod, everybody's getting it," the sergeant replied,

yawning. "They dropped two dozen incendiaries in our fields in Lincs, last week."

He was drinking a billy can of cocoa which he had boiled on the fire, but he didn't offer any. He had weak blue eyes, a receding chin, fresh features of characterless good-looks, wavy hair carefully combed and brilliantined. He was always on edge against Taffy, distrusting him, perhaps envying him. He lived in terror of losing a stripe and in constant hunger to gain another promotion. He sucked and scraped the officers for this, zealously carrying out their orders with the finicky short temper of a weak house-proud woman. He polished the barrack room floor and blacklead the stove himself because the boys refused to do more than give the place a regulation lick. And he leaped at the chance of putting a man on the peg, he was always waiting to catch somebody cutting a church parade or nipping out of camp to meet a girl when he should be on duty. Yet he was mortally afraid of a quarrel, of unpopularity, and he was always jovial, glassily jovial, even to the Welsh boy whom he knew he couldn't deceive.

"Who am I to relieve on guard?" the soldier asked.

"Nobby Sherraton. He's patrolling the ridge."

"OK." He slipped his rifle sling over his shoulder and put his helmet on. "You marching me out? Or shall I just go and send Nobby in?"

For once laziness overcame discretion.

"There's nobody about. Just go yourself," the sergeant said, smiling, posing now as the informal honest soldier. "I'll be seeing yer."

"Some day."

He left the hut and crossed the dry dead-white grass to the ridge where Nobby was on guard.

Nobby was his mate.

He had only been in the unit about a month. Before that he had been stationed just outside London and had done a lot of demolition and rescue work. He was from Mile End, and had roughed it. His hand and face showed that, his rough blackened hands, cigarette-stained, his red blotchy face with the bulbous nose, and the good blue eyes under tiny lids, and short scraggy lashes and brows. His hair was mousy and thin. He had been on the dole most of the time. He had been an unsuccessful boxer, he cleared out of that game when his brother, also a boxer, became punchdrunk and blind. He had plenty of tales of the Mosley faction. He was sometimes paid five bob to break up their meetings. He always took his five bob but he let the others do the breaking up. Who wants a black eye and a cut face for five bob? 'Tain't worth it. He rarely said anything about women. He didn't think much of lots of them; though like all Cockney youths he loved the 'old lady,' his mother. He wasn't married. No, sir.

He was a conscript. Naturally. He didn't believe in volunteering. And he didn't like the Army, its drills and orders and its insistence on a smart appearance. Smartness he disliked. Appearances he distrusted. Orders he resented. He was 'wise' to things. No sucker.

Taffy felt a warm little feeling under his skin, relief more than anything else, to see Nobby again. He hadn't to pretend with Nobby. Fundamentally they shared the same humanity, the unspoken humanity of comradeship, of living together, sharing what they had, not afraid to borrow or talk or shut up. Or to leave each other and stroll off to satisfy the need for loneliness.

Nobby was surprised so much that he flung out his delight

in a shout and a laugh and a wave of his arms "Taffy, lad!" he said. "Back already, eh? Boy!" Then he became normal.

"Can't keep away from this bloody sannytorium for long, can we?" he grumbled.

Taffy stood looking at him, then at the ground, then he turned away and looked nowhere

"What's wrong, kid?" Nobby said, his voice urgent and frightened, guessing "Anything bad? Caught a packet, did you?" He said the last two phrases slowly, his voice afraid to ask

"I didn't," Taffy said, his voice thin and unsteady. "I didn't. I'm all right I'm healry"

Nobby put his hand on his shoulder and turned him round. He looked at the white sucked-in face and the eyes looking nowhere.

"Did *she* get it?" and he too turned his head a little and swallowed. "She did," he said, neither asking a question nor making a statement Something absolute, the two words he said.

Taffy sat down, stretched out The grass was dead, white, wispy long grass, Nobby sat down, too

"They came over about eight o'clock the first night," Taffy said. "The town hadn't had a real one before I've told you we've only got apartments, the top rooms in an old couple's house The old ones got hysterics, see, Nobby And then they wouldn't do what I told them, get down the road to a shelter They wouldn't go out into the street and they wouldn't stay where they were "My chickens," the old man was blubbing all the time He's got an allotment up on the voel, see? Gwyneth made them some tea She was fine, she calmed them down. That was at the beginning, before the heavy stuff began. I went out the back to tackle the incendiaries The boy next

door was out there, too. He had a shovel and I fetched a saucepan. But it was freezing, and we couldn't dig the earth up quick enough. There were too many incendiaries. One fell on the roof and stuck in the troughing. The kid shinned up the pipe. It exploded in his face and he fell down. Twenty odd feet. I picked him up and both his eyes were out, see?"

He had gone back to the sing-song rhythm and the broad accent of his home, the back lanes and the back gardens. He was shuddering a little, and sick-white, fallow.

Nobby waited

"I took him into his own house," he said, controlling his voice now, almost reflective. "I left him to his sister, poor kid. Then I went in to see if Gwyneth was all right. She was going to take the old couple down the road to the shelter. She had a mack on over her dressing gown. We'd intended going to bed early, see? So I said she was to stay in the shelter. But she wanted to come back. We could lie under the bed together.

"I wanted her back, too, somehow. Then some more incendiaries fell, so I said 'Do as you like' and went at them with a saucepan. I thought sure one would blow my eyes out. Well, she took them down. Carried their cat for them. Soon as she'd gone the heavy stuff came. Oh Christ!"

Nobby let him go on, better let him go on.

"It knocked me flat, dazed me for a bit. Then I got up and another one flattened me. It was trying to stop me, see, Nobby. I crawled out of the garden, but it was dark as hell and buildings all down, dust and piles of masonry. Then he dropped some more incendiaries and the fires started. I knew she must be somewhere, see? I knew she must be somewhere. I began pulling the masonry away with my hands, climbed on to the

pile of it in the fire. I couldn't see with the smoke and I knew it wasn't any use, only I had to do it, see?

"Then suddenly the masonry fell downwards. The road was clear on the other side I thought it was all right after all, then. I thought she'd have reached the shelter. . . . But she hadn't.

"I found her about twenty yards down the road.

"She wasn't dead. Her clothes were gone. And her hands. She put them over her face, I reckon.

"She couldn't speak, but I knew she knew it was me.

"I carried her back in my arms Over the fallen house. The fire wasn't bad by then Took her home, see, Nobby Only the home was on fire. I wanted her to die all the time I carried her over a mile through the streets. Fires and hoses and water. And she wouldn't die. When I got her to the clearing station I began to think she'd live

"But they were only playing a game with me, see?"

He stood up and made himself calm.

"Well, there it is." He rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, wiping the cold sweat off.

"I knew she was going to die. When they told me she was—I didn't feel anything, Nobby"

"But she died while they were messing her body about with their hands, see?

"And she never said anything Never said anything to me.

"Not that it makes any difference, I suppose. We never did speak about those things much. Only, you know how it is, you want a word somehow. You want it to keep"

"Sure I know," Nobby said

"What's it all for, Nobby?" he said in a while. He looked so tired and beat. "I used to know what it was all about, but I can't understand it now."

"Aw, forget all about that," Nobby said. "You're here aincer, now?"

He put his hands on his mare's shoulders and let him lean against him for a bit

"I reckon you belong to each other for keeps, now," Nobby said.

"You believe that, Nobby?" he asked, slow and puzzled, but with a gathering force as his uncertainty came together.

"Yes. For you and 'er, I do. It wouldn't be true for me, or the sergeant in there, but for you two it is."

Taffy was still against his shoulder. Then slowly he straightened himself, moved back onto himself, and lifting his face he looked at the milky-white fields and the sentinel pines and the stars

"I knew it was so, really," he said. "Only I was afraid I was fooling myself"

He smiled, and moved his feet, pressing on them with his whole weight as if testing them after an illness

"I'm all right now, Nobby. Thank you, boy"

"I'll go, then," Nobby said. He slipped his rifle over his shoulder and as he moved off he hesitated, turned back, and touched his mare's arm lightly.

"Two's company, three's none," he said, and stumped off slowly to the lambing shed through the dead straw-grass

And the soldier was left alone on the flat upland ridge.

Below him the valleys widened into rich arable lakes on which the moonlight and the mist lay like the skeins which spiders spin round their eggs. Beyond the pools another chain of downland lay across the valleys, and beyond those hills the

coast. Over him, over the valleys, over the pinewoods, blue fingers came out of the earth and moved slanting across their quarters as the bombers droned in the stars over his head and swung round to attack the coastal city from inland. The sky over the coast was inflamed and violent, a soft blood-red

The soldier was thinking of the day he received his calling up papers, just a year ago. Sitting on the dry-stone wall of his father's back garden with Gwyneth by him, his ragged little brother kneeling by the chicken-run, stuffing cabbage stumps through the netting for the hens to peck, and laughing and pulling the stumps out as the old hen made an angry jab, his father riddling the ashes and the ramshackle garden falling to bits, broken trellis and tottering fence, his mother washing her husband's flannel vest and drovers in the tub, white and vexed. He had taken Gwyneth's hand, and her hand had said, "In coming and in going you are mine, now, and for a little while longer, and then for ever"

But it was not her footsteps that followed him down the lane from the station.

Now over his head the darkness was in full leaf, drifted with the purity of pines, the calm and infinite darkness of an English night, with the stars moving in slow declension down the sky. And the warm scent of resin about him and of birds and of all small creatures moving in the loose mould in the ferns like fingers in velvet.

And the soldier stood under the pines, watching the night move down the valleys and lift itself seawards, hearing the sheep cough and farm-dogs restlessly barking in the farms. And farther still the violence growing in the sky till the coast was a turbulent thunder of fire and sickening explosions, and there was no darkness there at all, no sleep.

"My life belongs to the world," he said. "I will do what I can."

He moved along the spur and looked down at the snow-grey ever-green woods and the glinting roofs scattered over the rich land

And down in the valleys the church bells began pealing, pealing, and he laughed like a lover, seeing his beloved

THE END

